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FAMOUS

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THE NARROW CORNER
by W. Somerset Maugham

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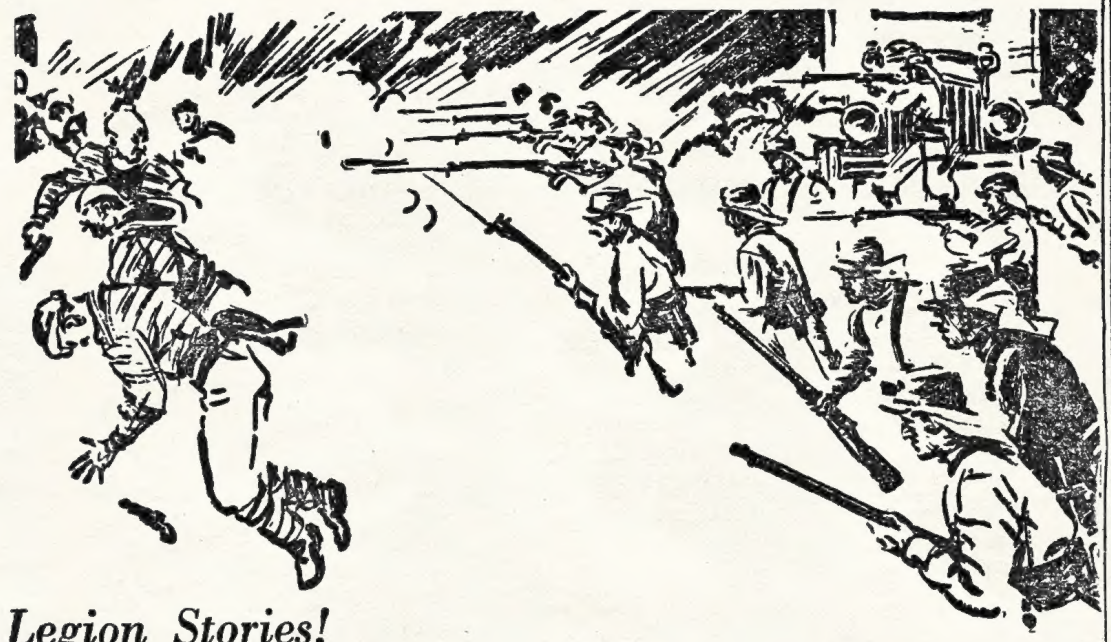
"For my sins, I was awarded the *Croix de Guerre*, the Medal of Morocco, the Medal of Syria, and the Rashaya Medal, which was specially struck for the survivors of that terrible blunder. I

TALES OF



Legion Stories!

THE FOREIGN LEGION

do not mention these decorations because I am proud of them. But it should be obvious that I must have been in the French Foreign Legion a few years in order to earn them. Such facts are recorded against me as Legionaire No. 1384, and can always be verified.

"The men of the force are the most amazing crowd it is possible to meet. They are recruited from all parts of Europe, America and the Near East, from every class and every nation, and they comprise thieves, murderers, bandits, cut-throats, dukes, counts and scum. *En masse* they are the finest fighting force in the world. Individually they are the biggest scoundrels on earth. While you are standing up, they are the best comrades a man could possibly have. But as soon as you drop out, they will thieve the boots from your feet. They spend most of their time cursing the French and devising means of escape. But when they go into action they do so with the cry, *'Vive la France!'* on their lips. *Soldat de la Légion Etrangère! Vous n'avez pas de nation. La France est votre Mère!'* And, God help them! What a mother! What pride of family has she? Is she mad that she must gather the scum of the earth and smother it with a pseudo fighting patriotism? And to what end? The protection of a scrap of land in Africa, and a smaller scrap of Arabia!"

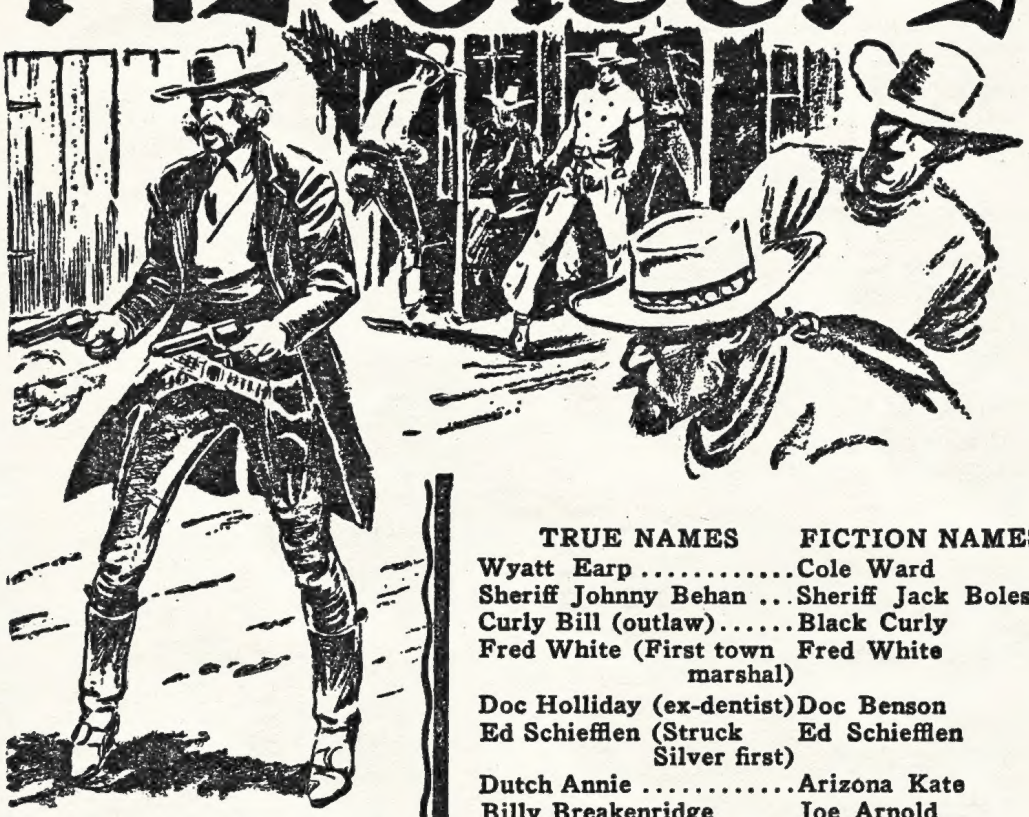
True Stories of Desert Warfare by Ex-Legionaires

THE FOREIGN LEGION

Tombstone

Into The Nest Of Outlawry That Was Tombstone Of "A Man For Breakfast" Fame Came One Who Kept His Law Badge Polished With Six-Gun Smoke—A Complete Novel Featuring Real Characters Of The True West.

Pistoleers



There was only one way for the Marshal to meet the challenge to his authority — with fast-flaming six-gun, and that is just how he did it.

TRUE NAMES	FICTION NAMES
Wyatt Earp	Cole Ward
Sheriff Johnny Behan	Sheriff Jack Boles
Curly Bill (outlaw)	Black Curly
Fred White (First town marshal)	Fred White
Doc Holliday (ex-dentist)	Doc Benson
Ed Schiefflen (Struck Silver first)	Ed Schiefflen
Dutch Annie	Arizona Kate
Billy Breakenridge (Deputy sheriff)	Joe Arnold
John Ringo (outlaw)	Johnny McGuire
Ike Clanton (outlaw)	Buck Boggs
Billy Clanton (outlaw)	Billy Boggs
Old Man Clanton (outlaw)	Old Man Boggs
Tom McEllery (outlaw)	Bull Haynes
Frank McEllery	Frank Haynes
Virgil Earp (Town marshal)	Star Ward
Morgan Earp	Shotgun Ward
Zwing Hunt (outlaw)	Bronk Walters
Billy Grounds (outlaw)	Tuscon Black
Joe Hill (outlaw)	Slim Connors
Frank Stilwell (outlaw)	Two-gun Nolan
Buckskin Frank Leslie (gunman)	One-shot Blake

COMPLETE NOVEL By CHARLES M. MARTIN

The frontier saloon in the Arizona high-mountain country underwent a sudden change. Boisterous voices died to a whisper; ceased altogether as tinkling spurs became still on the heels of boots resting on the long brass rail. The Apache Kid was celebrating a successful raid on the herds of Chihuahua, and men stopped what they were doing to listen when the Apache Kid spoke.

"I said *ever'body* steps up an' has a drink!"

The long bar was lined two-deep with leather-tanned cowboys and miners. The Apache Kid stood at the far end of the bar, his glittering black eyes fixed on a tall cowboy leaning against the back wall. Two long-barrelled six-guns hung on the Kid's thin legs; snugged down in the oiled holsters hanging from crossed belts around his lean waist. The child of an Apache mother by an American father, at twenty-four the Apache Kid was the deadliest and most ruthless gunman along the Border. The object of his attention was the only man in the saloon who had refused the outlaw's invitation to drink.

The tall stranger turned slowly as if he could feel those glittering black eyes boring into his back. No older than the outlaw, but long tawny mustachios above stern lips gave his young face an expression of mature earnestness. One could tell that the tall Texan would be sparing of speech; that he would mean what he said when he did speak. Blue eyes stared into the glittering black eyes with calm indifference while the stranger's thumbs hooked into the worn cartridge belts on his hips. He spat unerringly at a large brass spittoon and looked out through the door without comment.

"P'raps the *Senor* did not hear me. I, the Apache Kid, have said that *ever'body* should step up and have a drink with me!"

Once more the blue eyes of the stranger wandered back to lock glances with the outlaw. His left shoulder shrugged carelessly as he shifted the tobacco in his mouth. His voice was the slow drawl of Texas.

"I ain't drinkin', *amigo*. You boys jest go on an' have yore fun. Thanks jest th' same!"

The black eyes sparkled with fever. A slow smile of cruelty spread across the half-breed's sharp face. Not a man in the long room moved as they waited for the lightning to strike.

"But no, *Senor*," the outlaw purred softly. "You drink with the Apache Kid or you will never need the drink again. You *sabe, Senor?*"

The stranger's long face retained its expression of gloomy indifference. Everything about his powerful frame reflected a calm confidence in himself, from the tawny lion's mane under his gray Stetson to the hand-stitched half-boots on his big feet. Again he spat accurately at the spittoon before his deep voice boomed from his chest.

"There always has to be uh fust time, *Senor*. An' I ain't drinkin'!"

"You drink or you die!"

The Texan cocked his big head to one side as though to be sure he had heard correctly. Then his big right hand slapped the cedar grip of his Colt while calloused thumb dogged the hammer back and released it when the muzzle slid across the lip of the worn holster. Jagged flame winked from his hip as the Apache Kid slapped leather with both small hands; spun to the left and jerked back to shooting position as the twin guns jerked spasmodically from the holsters on his thin legs. The Texan shot again before the outlaw could thumb the heavy hammers, and the Apache Kid buckled his knees and sank to the sawdust in sections. First his knees, then down to his haunches to roll on his back where the thin legs straightened slowly, twitched a time or two, and became quiet. The tall Texan stood in the same position, but now both hands were filled as he faced the silent crowd.

"I ain't drinkin'," he announced quietly. "Is any friend of th' departed raisin' his voice tuh opine different!"

The crowd turned back to the bar and reached for their glasses. The Texan holstered his left-hand gun as he thumbed fresh loads into the weapon in his right hand. His blue eyes studied the crowd for a moment before the heavy shoulders shrugged carelessly. After which he walked to the front and shouldered his way

through the swinging batwings. A stranger stepped up to him on the dirt sidewalk and spoke softly.

"You took a long chance in there, Cole Ward," he stated, "Th' Apache Kid was the fastest we had in these parts up t' now."

The Texan smiled coldly. "Up tuh now is right, Marshal," he answered quietly. "I'm claimin' self defense!"

U. S. Marshal Charley Dade smiled. "Thought you'd know me," he chuckled. "An' I recognized you from over Dodge City way. You git tired bein' town marshal over there?"

Cole Ward showed no surprise that he had been recognized. Dodge City was tough, and any one who had maintained law and order in bloody Kansas for two years was sure to be known wherever men carried Colts on their legs. He smiled faintly as he answered the grizzled federal officer.

"They didn't need me no longer in Dodge," he drawled. "Th' town was gittin' plumb peaceful, so I thought I'd drift over tuh Pima County."

Marshal Dade's shrewd old eyes lighted with a sudden thought. Violence surged unchecked in the new silver fields of Pima County, and the Law was laughed at by the hordes of desperadoes that had flocked to the new city of Tombstone. Perhaps he could interest this Maverick lawman who had worn a star in Texas before he was fully grown.

"So you're on th' loose," he began slowly. "An' ridin' toward th' toughest town in th' Southwest, not exceptin' Dodge. An' me tryin' to find a good depity to carry a little law among them unwashed sons what brags that they has a man for breakfast ever' mornin'!"

"Yeah," the Texan drawled without a flicker of the eyes, "I'll jest take that job yo're offerin' me, ole Charley."

The United States marshal took a badge from his pocket and pinned it to the worn vest. Cole Ward's right hand went up automatically as the old peace officer began to mumble the customary oath. A dozen times he had been sworn in by this same effective method, and he shifted his crossed gunbelts when Dade had finished.

"I now appoint you th' new depity U. S. marshal of Cochise County," Dade chuckled softly.

"Cochise County? That's uh new one on me," the tall Texan answered. "I was headin' fer Pima County an' Tombstone!"

"Same thing," Dade grinned. "Only Pima County was too danged big, an' she was split up in two. Th' east end was made Cochise County with Tombstone th' County seat. Jack Boles is sheriff, an' Fred White is th' town marshal. Handle it th' same way you did in Dodge, an' good luck to you, Deputy Ward."

The Texan squinted across the high mountains toward the Southeast. Twice he cleared his throat as though he were about to speak, but each time his lips tightened under the tawny long-horn mustache. Recognition gleamed in the faded eyes of Marshal Dade.

"Yeah, you kin start on that case first," he suggested softly. "It was Black Curly an' his gang of long-riders what done for yore uncle, ole Jim Ward. Curly hangs out around Tombstone when he ain't makin' a raid, but you got to have air-tight proof before you makes an arrest."

The blue eyes were steady and bright as Cole Ward turned to face his superior. "They bushed him in th' rough without givin' th' trail-crew no show," he stated quietly. "Uncle Jim was drivin' them three thousand head of Mexican long-horns on contract to th' San Carlos reservation. Fourteen men in th' drive, an' only one of 'em got away. Yuh say Black Curly hangs out in Tombstone?"

"You'll find him at th' Crystal Palace sooner or later." Dade answered.

"An' he's got a temper what's plumb unreliable."

Cole Ward shrugged his big shoulders. "This Apache Kid was th' same way," he drawled. "Guess I'll be ridin' on, Charley."

The long-faced Texan rode southeast with the setting sun at his back. His blanket roll was behind the cantle of his saddle, a heavy Spencer carbine peeping from the saddle-boot under his left leg. His worn range clothing was covered with alkali when he rode into Tombstone a week later and stopped at the O. K. Corral at the end of Allen Street. Hard-faced men stared at the gleaming star on his vest when he clanked into the Occidental Hotel and signed the soiled register. Joe Blake, the proprietor, greeted him with a quiet smile.

"Howdy, Ward," he whispered. "Heard you was comin'. How'd you leave ever'thing over in Dodge?"

"Quiet," Ward answered. "You seen Jack Boles hereabouts?"

A medium-sized man with a round rosy face straightened up from the end of the desk and came forward. His right hand was extended in greeting. The Texan studied the face as he hesitated; then shook hands quickly.

"I'm Jack Boles, sheriff of Cochise County," the red-faced man said jovially. "Glad to have you here, Maverick. I was wonderin' when th' U. S. marshal was goin' to send me some help."

"Howdy," the Texan answered shortly. "I'm uh federal officer, Sheriff. I'll let yuh know when I need help."

The sheriff's face took on a deeper hue. "We don't do things here in Tombstone like they did in Dodge," he answered. "Thought I'd let you know before you made any mistakes, Ward!"

The Texan smiled. "If I made any mistakes, they covered 'em up with dirt," he answered dryly. "You take care of th' county business, Sheriff. I'll handle my end on my own. Right now they's too dang many outlaws gittin' fat in these parts, an' I got my orders direct from th' U. S. marshal. I'll be seein' you around town."

The sheriff stared at the broad back as the Texan took his key and climbed the stairs. He threw his saddle-bags in a corner of his room without taking his eyes from a tall man who occupied the only chair near the window. Blue eyes read the badge on the faded vest as the Texan smiled gently.

"Howdy, White," he drawled. "Shore enough law here in Tombstone."

Fred White uncoiled his lean frame and shook hands gravely. The badge of town marshal rode above his top vest pocket; two heavy Colts were strapped low on his long legs below the crossed gunbelts.

"Saw you talkin' tuh Jack Boles," he answered. "Guess mebbe you figgered it out that th' sheriff is some shakes as uh politician."

The Texan nodded as he took a seat on the bed. "You seen Black Curly?" he asked directly.

The town marshal grinned. "Seen an' heard him," he answered dryly. "Him an' his gang was shootin' holes in th' air jest before you rode in."

"I'd pass the word if I was you," Ward advised quietly. "No shootin' within the city limits. Might as well begin now to de-horn some of them long-riders."

Fred White stiffened. "There must be clost to uh hundred of them outlaws nestin' around Tombstone," he explained. "She's uh big order, Maverick!"

"An' I'm backin' you up," Ward answered quietly. "How come th' sheriff tuh let 'em git away with it?"

"In the first place, he wants to keep on livin'," White answered dryly. "In th' second place, he's uh politician like I explained. Him an' Black Curly is on purty good terms."

"You mean he's in cahoots?" the Texan demanded quickly.

The town marshal shook his head. "He's square enough," he admitted. "Only he allus takes th' easiest an' smoothest way. You an' him won't git along, Maverick."

"I been uh law Maverick for quite uh spell," the Texan drawled slowly. "Now I'm wearin' th' federal law-brand on my hip, an' I aims to stay ontil Tombstone gits peaceful."

"She won't never be that in yore time nor mine," the town marshal answered. "Jest listen out there now!"

Loud shouts were ringing down the street as the two men stopped talking. Pistol shots roared a volley as spurring riders galloped past the hotel, and the Texan jerked his head toward the door as he rose to his feet.

"Might as well begin now," he suggested quietly. "Tell them rannihans to keep their guns in leather whilst they're in town. I'll back up yore play all th' way!"

CHAPTER II

A MAN FOR BREAKFAST

Men nudged each other as the town marshal crossed the lobby with the tall Texan at his heels. They knew that Black Curly and his gang of trail wolves had staged the little demonstration to show their contempt for the arrival of the new United States marshal; knew the outlaws were waiting in front of the O. K. Corral a dozen strong to hooraw the two officers if they tried to enforce the peace.

Gaunt and serious, Fred White clanked up the sidewalk without looking to right or left. Black Curly was sitting a sorrel horse in the center of the group with Johnny McGuire and Buck Boggs on either side. Cole Ward was two paces behind White, his blue eyes marking each rider coldly to place them in the class where they belonged. McGuire and Boggs were the most dangerous next to Black Curly; but Ward had been handling dangerous men for years. Now he waited for Fred White to deliver his message.

"New town-law, men," the town marshal began without preliminaries. "After this keep yore guns in leather whilst in town or answer to me. This here shootin' up th' place has got to stop!"

"Yeah?" Curly drawled smilingly, his long black mustaches twitching. "An' who's yore new helper?"

"Th' name's Cole Ward, gents," the Texan answered softly. "Most times called th' Law Maverick in case some of you has forgot. Late of Dodge City an' Texas, an' I'm backin' up Fred White's play. Do I hear any objections among you uncurried sons?"

Eyes gleamed sullenly in the twilight under drooping hat brims. Black Curly continued to smile as he stared at Ward. The tension left the group when he answered.

"No objections, Maverick," he chuckled. "I've heard a lot about yuh, an' we'll git along if you don't ride too high in th' stirrups. You boys keep them guns in leather unless you has to defend yoreselves!"

He wheeled his horse and rode down the street toward the Bird Cage Opera House as the two officers stared. The outlaws followed their leader silently as Sheriff Johnny Boles rode up and dismounted near the big corral. Cole Ward watched in silence while the sheriff addressed himself to White.

"Heard you give Black Curly an' his wolves orders not to shoot their six-guns in town. You can't back up no such fool play as that, Fred!"

The town marshal frowned. "I can try," he muttered. "Orders from th' U. S. marshal, an' his depity is in th' lookout chair to cover th' play."

"Like I tole the Maverick, this here ain't Dodge," Boles answered with a smile. "You got to use more politics an' less force to git these gents in line."

"No suh," the Texan disagreed. "Uh peace officer ain't sposed tuh be

uh politician, an' we aims tuh talk to them long-riders in language they savvy. They either stops shootin' off their guns in town, or some of 'em is goin' tuh stop shootin' for good. That's final, Sheriff, an' evenin' to yuh!"

Boles frowned as the two men walked back to the Occidental. The tall Texan retired to his room while Fred White continued on to the little jail. Laughter and song came from the saloons and dance halls in the shadows of Tough Nut Street, but the roar of six-guns was missing. Cole Ward slept soundly after his long ride; was bright-eyed and refreshed when he met Fred White after breakfast the following morning. The town marshal jerked his head up the street toward the O. K. Corral.

"Show-down," he muttered under his breath. "Black Curly lickered up last night an' talked with his mouth. They're gittin' ready to start th' fireworks!"

A dozen six-guns roared as he finished speaking. "Take Black Curly," Cole Ward grunted in his chest. "I'll come up behind yuh!"

Straight to the corrals the two officers high-heeled it, grim-faced and alert. The outlaws were standing beside their saddled horses with Black Curly a little to one side. Guns were back in their holsters as they grinned at the two men. Fred White walked up to Curly as his right hand made a swift pass for the gun on his leg, and he covered the outlaw as he spoke.

"Hands up, Curly. I'm arrestin' you for disturbin' th' peace!"

"Gwan," the burly outlaw grinned. "I ain't had my iron out of th' holster!"

He flicked his left hand and grabbed the gun as he spoke. He twisted the barrel as White pulled the trigger, and the town marshal fell to the ground. Cole Ward leaped forward like a spring as the heavy gun rose in his hand and clubbed down on Black Curly's head. Then the Texan wheeled on the group of surprised riders with a Colt forty-five in each hand.

"Hit leather an' keep ridin'," he boomed. "I'll drop th' fust man what makes uh move for his iron. This Curly wolf goes tuh jail if I have tuh kill the pack of you!"

The surprised outlaws mounted their horses and spurred away after one glance at those blazing blue eyes. Sheriff Boles puffed up out of breath with a shotgun in his fat hands. Cole Ward was bending over Fred White; rose slowly and shook his head.

"Daid," he clipped.

"I seen th' whole play," Boles snapped. "Accidental, an' you can't git a jury to say otherwise!"

The tall Texan leaned over Black Curly and snapped handcuffs on the thick wrists. He ignored the red-faced sheriff as he hooked strong fingers in the outlaw's collar and dragged him down the street to the little jail. Black Curly was just regaining consciousness when the cell door clicked behind Ward. The outlaw cursed luridly as he jangled the hardware on his wrists, but stopped to listen when he recognized the voice of Sheriff Boles in the outer office.

"You better turn him loose, Maverick," the sheriff began smoothly. "Black Curly controls a hundred men back in them hills!"

The tall Texan was filling in a form at the scarred desk. "Th' charge is murder," he stated flatly. "Killin' uh peace officer in th' discharge of his duty. Uh hundred or uh thousand long-riders; she's all one tuh me."

"You're jest gettin' good men kilt off," the sheriff growled. "You can't run this country that away!"

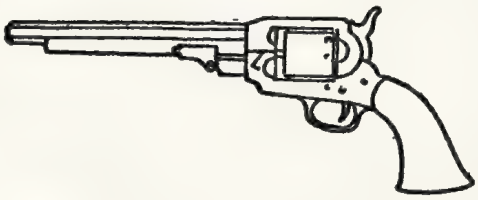
Cole Ward started to speak; got to his feet with a leap as a tall man darkened the door and slouched in with a grin on his blocky face. The two tall Texans shook hands quickly; smiled grimly at each other for a moment before Cole Ward spoke.

"Glad yuh decided tuh come over, Star. Th' town marshal was just kilt by Black Curly, an' the' job is open if yuh want tuh give it uh whirl."

Star Ward held up his right hand and nodded his head. Cole Ward mumbled the oath of office and handed the new town marshal a badge. Then he turned to the sheriff and made a short introduction.

"Sheriff Boles; meet Star Ward, my brother. They ain' an untamed wolf in Tombstone kin turn uh gun on him an' live tuh brag about it. This is yore office, Star!"

"Family affair," the sheriff sneered coldly. "I've heard consid'able about you three."



Star Ward grinned wickedly. "Yeah," he agreed. "Yuh've heard tell of Shotgun Ward, Sher'ff. He jest now signed up as shotgun messenger on th' Benson stage. What yuh reckon, Sher'ff?"

"They'll be three new graves on Boot Hill inside a week," Boles muttered sullenly. "An' th' three Ward boys from Texas will be fillin' same."

Cole Ward handed the sheriff a paper. "I'm subpoeanin' yuh as uh witness to this killin'," he clipped. "As sheriff you git out an' round up uh jury, cause this jigger comes up fer trial before old Jedge Gray at nine in th' mornin'. See yuh later, Boles."

He stomped out of the office and made his way to the court house where he filed his charges with the old justice. Cole's face was grim as he started toward the O.K. Corral for his horse, and his lips tightened under the tawny mustache when he glanced at two men leaning against the poles. One of the men was Bull Haynes, who was a known rustler; the other was the outlaw's younger brother. Both were counted fast with six-guns, and the older man stepped forward to face the deputy marshal.

"You better turn Black Curly loose," he snarled. "He never fired them shots like his gun will show. It was me an' Frank what did most of that shootin'."

The Texan did not hesitate. "In which case yo're both under arrest," he drawled.

Bull Haynes slapped his right hand down to the walnut grip of his gun. The long barrel started up before the Texan moved; hung on the holster lip as flame roared from the marshal's right hip. The big outlaw crashed forward to the corral dust as the Texan pivoted above the smoking Colt to cover the slender outlaw. Frank Haynes loosened his grip to let the gun slide back into his holster as he slowly elevated his hands. Cole Ward stepped forward and disarmed the outlaw, jerked his head toward the jail.

"Git goin'," he drawled. "You asked for it, an' I hates tuh see uh gent disappointed."

A tall thin man stepped out from the Crystal Palace and fell in step with the deputy marshal as he herded his prisoner down the narrow street. Cole Ward glanced at the stranger from the corner of his eye; growled a booming greeting without turning his head.

"Howdy, Doc; heard you was in town!"

Doc Benson smiled with his gray eyes. Dressed in immaculate broadcloth with frock coat; polished handmade boots and forty-dollar gray Stetson. One of the fastest gunmen in the West since he had retired from the practice of dentistry to become a professional gambler. Lean of frame and pale of face, and an old friend of Ward's from Dodge City days.

"Howdy, Maverick," he answered softly. "I'll side you down to th' jail jest in case of. I don't like that fat sheriff who plays politics from hell to breakfast. When's th' trial?"

"Tuhmorrow at nine," Ward answered from the corner of his mouth. "Looks like we got company at th' jail. Star is th' new town marshal, an' looks like he needs help."

Not once did he raise his voice as he prodded his slouching prisoner down the street. Men stared from doorways; averted their eyes when they saw Doc Benson siding the deputy marshal. A dozen riders were sitting their horses in front of the jail. Six-guns bristled from their thighs with carbines peeping from saddle scabbards under their left legs. Star Ward was standing in the doorway with a double-barrelled shotgun in his hands, making a slow arc that covered the threatening crowd. Cole Ward shoved Frank Haynes against the wall and faced the crowd with six-guns in both hands.

"Well?" he drawled.

"Yuh got to turn Black Curly loose," Johnny McGuire growled. "Or we'll tear your dang jail down an' scatter the pieces."

"What's holdin' yuh back?"

The mounted outlaws turned to stare at Doc Benson as his smooth voice drawled behind them. The gambler had thrown back his frock coat on the right side; a sawed-off shotgun rested in his hands with the leather strap over his shoulder. The calm gray eyes were cold as he stared back at the scowling outlaws, and Cole Ward smiled as horses were backed to the side.

"Th' law has come tuh Tombstone, gents," he announced in his soft booming drawl. "Tombstone might have uh man for breakfast ever' mornin', but from now on most of 'em is goin' tuh be long-ridin' rustlers an' hawss thieves. Black Curly goes tuh trial in the mornin', an' I hopes they hang him higher'n hell!"

"So you coppered your bets," McGuire sneered. "We'll remember that one, Doc Benson!"

"You meaning that personal?"

The doctor's eyes were hard as he stared at the burly outlaw. He had taken five thousand dollars away from McGuire just the week before at poker, and the outlaw was a notoriously poor loser. McGuire stared into the tunnels of the deadly sawed-off and withdrew his bid with a sneer.

"I'm meanin' it for ever' man what rides with Black Curly," he answered. "We'll do our gamblin' at th' Alhambra after this!"

The immaculate dentist smiled coldly. "That's your privilege, gents," he agreed. "But right now you better scratch your braunks and light a shuck. Th' Maverick is a friend of mine, an' I'm sidin' any play he makes. Th' trial is at nine tomorrow morning!"

The outlaws took the out offered them and spurred up the street. Cole Ward put his prisoner in a cell and filled out the necessary papers. Doc Benson slid the sawed-off under his coat and took a seat along the wall; smiled softly when the deputy marshal turned and held out his hand.

"Thanks, Doc," the Texan said simply. "You allus did show up at th' right time."

"Heard you was comin'," Benson answered smilingly. "One of Black Curly's riders come foggin' into town with th' news about you killin' th' Apache Kid over at Prescott. Figgered you might need a little help, so I buckled old Betsy under my coat. What you think about this trial?"

"Black Curly is guilty as hell," the marshal answered promptly. "But you know more about these juries than I do. What you figger, Doc?"

The gambler shrugged. "They'll turn him loose," he answered positively. "Fine him twenty-five dollars for disturbin' th' peace, an' he'll be rustlin' cows tomorrow night. But don't take it to heart, Maverick. There's more than one way of ridin' th' law trail. He'll try to get you shore as hell, after which we plants him on Boot Hill!"

The court room was crowded

when Cole Ward marched his prisoner along the narrow aisle and took his position against the wall where he could see every man in the room. Star Ward stood at the back wall with a double-barrelled shotgun in his hands. At one side sat another Texan with a shotgun; the new messenger of the Benson stage. Doc Benson was on the opposite side of the room, immaculate in well pressed broadcloth. Most of the seats were filled with friends of Black Curly who had scowled when Star Ward had insisted that they leave their guns on a long table over which he presided. Judge Gray was as gray as his name, and he rapped on the table with a gavel as he sternly called for order.

CHAPTER III

THE TRIAL

Black Curly wore a bandage around his head; stained crimson from the blow that had knocked him cold. His little black eyes never left the face of Cole Ward while man after man was called to the witness stand to testify in his behalf. The jury watched the entire proceedings with stiff poker faces as the judge summed up the evidence in addressing them.

"You have heard the evidence, gents," he began. "Town Marshal Fred White was kilt with his own gun while arrestin' th' accused. United States Deputy Marshal Ward has given his testimony which shows that the two men were scuffling for possession of the gun. You will retire and bring in a verdict according to the evidence offered!"

The jury filed out and stamped back within five minutes. A bearded miner acting as foreman stood up in his seat and handed a paper to the judge. The justice cleared his throat importantly and read aloud:

> We, the jury find the accused not guilty of murder by reason of the testimony. We recommend that he be fined for disturbing the peace of Tombstone and for resisting arrest.
>
> Fred Bailey, Foreman.

The assembled outlaws cheered loudly as Black Curly grinned at Cole Ward. The Texan's face was devoid of expression as the judge rapped for order, and he stared straight ahead as the judge called the prisoner before the bar.

"The jury has found you not guilty of the crime of murder," he said sternly. "You are therefore acquitted, but I hereby assess you twenty-five dollars for disturbing the peace, and fifty dollars for resisting arrest. Let this be a lasting lesson to you!"

The big outlaw grinned and reached into his pocket. He laid four double eagles on the bar and waved both hands to his friends. His bearded face was good-natured as he passed Cole Ward, but his thin lips whispered as he passed.

"I'll git you fer this, Maverick!"

The Texan gave no sign that he had heard the threat. As the crowd cleared the court room, Cole walked down Allen Street with his two brothers and Doc Benson. It was the dentist who voiced the thoughts of all four.

"The trouble is going to come from Johnny McGuire and Buck Boggs first," he said thoughtfully. "Them two is hatchin' up something right now, Maverick."

"Yeah," Cole Ward drawled. "An' th' best way tuh settle trouble is tuh meet it half-way. They said they was hangin' out at th' Alhambra from now on."

"You watch that Buck Boggs for uh hide-out gun," Doc Benson warned. "He's sudden as a rattler an' just about as tricky, an' Bull Haynes was his saddle-pard on th' owl-hoot trail."

"Cattle rustlers," the Maverick growled deep in his throat. "Th' gang what bushed old Jim Ward an' th' Texas boys. What yuh say, Star?"

The new town marshal rose to his feet and hitched the gunbelts around his lean hips. "Let's go," he answered softly.

"You stay here an' guard th' jail, Shotgun," Cole told his older brother. "Me an' Star is enough tuh handle this!"

"Including me," Doc Benson interrupted. "I didn't like the way that rustler talked yesterday, and it might be he'd repeat his remarks. I'll cover your backs, gents!"

Shoulder to shoulder the three tall men walked up the street to the Alhambra saloon. Space was at a premium at the tie-rack in front of the batwing doors. Cole Ward stepped through first and kept to the left as Star Ward followed him and stepped to the right. Doc Benson shouldered through and leaned back against the front wall, slender hands hooked in the crossed belts above his slim waist.

Men crowded the mahogany bar three deep with five bartenders working swiftly. Black Curly was not to be seen, but Johnny McGuire was the center of a group of long-riders at the end of the bar. Buck Boggs nudged the burly outlaw as he stepped to one side and fell into a crouch. Johnny McGuire glanced up; sat his glass on the bar and pushed himself clear. His little eyes were gleaming with hatred as he stared at the deputy marshal.

"Now what?" he growled.

The tall Texan did not raise his deep voice, but he spoke clearly. "Yo're uh known rustler, McGuire. Yuh better hit th' out-trail an' keep makin' tracks. I see you here in an hour, an' I aim tuh talk tuh you through smoke. Git out—or git kilt!"

Johnny McGuire dropped his right hand down to the notched grip of his gun. Second only to the notorious Black Curly among the outlaws, he was, and credited with having killed eight men in Tombstone alone. Now his little eyes were slitted as he faced the deputy marshal squarely.

"Why, you big unwashed son," he growled. "You kin do your talkin' right here an' now. There ain't no time like th' present!"

His hand jerked up as he finished speaking. The tall Texan was standing empty handed facing him, and none saw the lightning draw that filled his hand and flamed against his lean hip. The outlaw jerked as a slug took him high in the right shoulder; lurched sideways as his left hand slapped leather to bring his other gun up. Cole Ward watched until the heavy gun started up in that split-second of time; then his Colt roared again to shock the burly gunfighter to the floor.

Buck Boggs half-turned to watch his pard; wheeled swiftly with flaming gun just as Star Ward fired from the right. Doc Benson stood empty handed against the wall, smiling with amusement. The deputy marshal drawled a question at the staring group around the two bodies.

"Any other rustlers tired of breathin' th' pure air of Arizony?"

They shuffled their feet but were careful to keep hands away from their holsters. The swinging doors parted to admit the portly figure of Sheriff Boles. The sheriff stared at the bodies; turned on his heel to face Cole Ward.

"That your doin's?"

The tall Texan nodded. "Yeah," he answered. "What about it?"

"I'm sheriff of Cochise County, an' I arrest you for murder," Boles snapped. "Hand over them guns!"

Cole Ward smiled. "You ain't," he answered softly. "I won't let you arrest me, Boles. Mebbe some other day, but not now."

"You—"

"Careful," the Texan warned the sputtering sheriff. "You an' me both knows yuh don't pack th' sand to go up agin me in uh show-down, so don't crowd yore luck, Sher'ff."

Doc Benson laughed aloud. "Politics," he chuckled. "He'll get you with politics, Maverick."

Johnny Boles paled. He knew the reputation of the ex-dentist; knew

that biting humor the gambler backed up with the skill of gun-magic when necessary. But the sheriff had to save his face, and he turned to his deputy who was watching the play from the card room at the back.

"Arrest that man, Joe. I'm holdin' him for th' murder of Johnny McGuire!"

Joe Arnold was a good deputy and loyal to the sheriff. He had witnessed the whole affair, and he shrugged his bony shoulders as he answered his superior.

"Self defense, Johnny. McGuire started to draw first, an' I'd have to say the same on the stand. I seen the whole play from right here!"

"Thanks, Arnold," the Texan drawled. "Uh man don't have tuh worry about uh feller no matter what side he's on, when that feller is honest an' has th' sand tuh tell th' truth."

Sheriff Boles sputtered and backed out of the saloon. Cole Ward holstered his guns and turned back to face the band of men at the end of the bar. Many of them were known outlaws; long-riders who raided the Texas herds and robbed the stages, but who could not be brought to justice because of their numbers and the fear they instilled in judges and juries alike.

"I'm tellin' the lot of yuh," the tall Texan said quietly. "One at uh time or in bunches, I aims tuh make yuh hard tuh find. You been callin' me th' Law Maverick, an' uh Maverick ain't bedded down on no one range. Those of you what's got uh guilty conscience better git out or git kilt, an' I ain't particular. Th' law has come here tuh stay!"

He turned his back on them and walked to the door. Star Ward followed him while Doc Benson leaned against the wall and watched the crowd. Several of the outlaws dropped their hands to their guns and stopped the movements when they saw the cold gray eyes of the gambler watching them. Doc Benson walked to the bar and bought a drink, downed it neat and strolled slowly to the street. Cole and Star Ward were disappearing in the marshal's office, and the gambler turned in at the Occidental to look over the games.

A slender rider was telling the players about the fight in the Alhambra, unmindful of the gambler who had stopped at one side to hear the recital. He recognized the man as Tuscon Black; a gunman who rode with Black Curly on his raiding trips toward the Mexican border.

"What gits me is this Doc Benson," Black continued. "There he was coverin' up th' law when it wasn't none of his put-in. That gent is goin' to git hisself rubbed out some dark night!"

A man nudged him and jerked his head to the side. Tuscon Black straightened slowly as his eyes rested on the man he had been discussing. Then he squared around to face Doc Benson who was watching him with that tight-lipped smile Tombstone knew so well.

"Mebbe you are goin' to do the rubbin' out," the gambler remarked in his southern drawl. "I could not help overhearin' your little spiel!"

"So what?" the slender gunman barked.

The tall gambler stepped forward swiftly as his right hand plunged down to the gun on his hip. His left hand locked over the gunman's right hand before the draw was completed. The gun in his own right hand slapped across with a whipping stroke that caught the gunman full in the face. Tuscon Black screamed hoarsely as the blood spurted from his broken nose and battered lips. Again the heavy gun rose and fell, and the gambler loosed his hold and pushed the sagging man aside where he dropped limply to the sawdust.

Then Doc Benson turned to the players around the roulette table.

"Like he said, I was backin' up Cole Ward," he admitted quietly. "Knowed him years ago down on th' Panhandle where men settles their arguments face to face. Any gent got anything to say?"

They turned their faces away as he stared them down one at a time. Memories of the handkerchief battle he had fought in Denver with Bud Ryan came back to them. Both men had had their left hands tied with the same handkerchief; both had gripped bowie knives with their right hands. Doc Benson had received a slash in the left shoulder just before he cut the handkerchief that bound him to a dying man, and few gunfighters had the nerve to face cold steel. The gray-eyed gambler turned away and started for the door; side-stepped quickly as Sheriff Boles came through and reached for his shoulder.

"Don't lay a hand on me, Boles," he warned coldly. "You wantin' somethin' of me?"

"I'm giving you twenty-four hours to leave town," the sheriff blustered.

"Yeah? An' then what?"

"There's other towns," Boles answered. "Better you choose one a good ways off!"

"When th' twenty-four hours is up, you come an' tell me," the gambler said coldly. "Now get out of my way before I forget that you're part of th' law here in Tombstone. An' a dang small part," he added, as he pushed through the swinging doors.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAW RIDES

Cole Ward came quickly to the door of the jail as the sound of pounding feet drummed down Allen Street from the west. A lathered sorrel slid to a stop with bunched feet as a tall gaunt man hit the dirt and braked his boot heels to stop the momentum of his slide. His red flannel shirt marked him a miner, and the deputy marshal drawled a greeting.

"Ed Schiefflen; long time no see yuh."

"Howdy, Maverick," the gaunt miner jerked thankfully. "I'm dang glad to see you ridin' th' law trail here in Tombstone. My manager has jest been kilt an' robbed over at th' Contention."

"Grab uh chair," the Texan answered. "Black Curly?"

The man who had made the first silver strike in Tombstone shook his head. "It wasn't Curly," he answered positively. "Th' assistant manager lived long enough to talk, an' he recognized both these hold-ups."

Curious men crowded around the door as he leaned forward to whisper in the deputy marshal's ear. Cole Ward got up and walked slowly to the door, his long face thoughtful and serious.

"You gents git on about yore business," he growled. "Th' Contention Mine has been robbed if yuh wants tuh know th' why-fors. Manager an' assistant both killed."

He grinned and turned back to Schiefflen as the loungers raced up Allen Street to spread the news. "Yuh say it was Bronk Walters an' Tuscon Black?"

"Charley recognized Bronk Walters' voice," the miner answered positively. "An' the slender jigger had his face all mussed up where some gent had pistol-whipped him with a gun."

"Doc Benson did that last night in th' Occidental when he caught Tuscon shootin' off his mouth. Give it to me straight, Ed."

"Them two come in the office of the Contention just after clean-up this mornin'," the miner began. "Ed Brand an' Charley was makin' up the payroll, an' she run about fifteen thousand dollars. They never had a chanct. Them two outlaws come in a shootin' before Ed or Charley could reach for their guns. Then they

grabbed the payroll an' lit out toward Charleston. We fogged it up there an' found Charley cashin' an' Ed plumb dead; so I forked the sorrel an' lit out hell fer leather to let you know."

Cole Ward was on his feet hitching up the crossed gunbelts around his lean hips. His long fingers were flexing to loosen his muscles; blue eyes blazing under the tawny hair. His voice was the same booming drawl when he turned to Schiefflen.

"Stay here an' pass th' word tuh Star," he said quietly. "I'm ridin' over tuh Charleston tuh see what's on the other side of the hill!"

"Better take some help," the miner suggested. "Them two is rapid on the trigger, an' deadly as tarantulers."

The deputy marshal nodded. "Yeah," he agreed softly. "You tell Star I'll be back right after dinner."

He walked through the back and swung up on a long-legged bay; loped out of town and headed south toward Charleston. The stamp-mill at Charleston was the main reason for the saloons and stores in the little town back in the hills, and the deputy marshal swung down in front of Hop Sing's eating house and perched himself on a high stool. Two miners were finishing a late breakfast, and the officer listened attentively to their conversation.

"Had a couple drinks up at the Gold Nugget," one of them was saying. "Tuscon Black must have made a stake, cause he was buyin' for the house, an' payin' in gold. Him an' his pard was dirty with dinero!"

Cole Ward finished his coffee and strolled up the street. The waters of the San Pedro glistened in the sun under the bridge, and the tall Texan left his horse at the rack and walked down the narrow street toward the Gold Nugget. Shouldering his way through the swinging doors, he stopped with his back against the wall while he looked over the crowd.

Three bartenders were busy behind the long bar, serving the miners who were lined up two-deep. Bronk Walters and Tuscon Black were half-way up the room surrounded by shouting men dressed in red flannel shirts and miners' boots. Bronk Walters was a tall rider with a reputation for riding anything in wild horse-flesh. Many times he had been seen with Black Curly's raiders who robbed the Mexican cattlemen with impunity, driving the stolen cattle to Arizona and New Mexico where there was a ready market and no question asked. Slow of speech, with the deep booming voice of most silent men, but fast and deadly with rifle or six-gun.

Tuscon Black was smaller and very slender. Two ivory handled six-guns were thonged low on his gray pants tucked in half-boots, and it was common report that he packed a pair of derringers in special pockets of those hand-made boots. Now the long nose was broken and swollen where the gun barrel in the hands of Doc Benson had swiped him the night before. Both lips were swollen and split, and little black eyes blazed savagely with the memory of the pistol whipping he had taken without a comeback. A hush fell over the crowd as he began to talk in a strange lisp because of his battered lips.

"I got that Doc Benson marked down on my gun right now," he snarled viciously. "You know what he done? Sneaked up behind when I wasn't lookin' an' cracked down on me with his iron. Then he put the boots to me when I was out cold on th' floor. Him an' that damn depity marshal ain't neither one got long to live. I'm gittin' the both of them come dark!"

He reached for his glass and drained it at a single gulp as the silence deepened about him. He glanced at the ring of faces, let his eyes wander across the long room to the door where Cole Ward stood with big shoulders against the wall. The marshal's thumbs were hooked in the belts above his hips, his blue eyes staring

at the battered face of the boaster. Tuscon straightened up as the marshal's lips curled with amusement; pushed himself away from the bar as he fell into a crouch.

"Jest like Doc Benson," he snarled. "Sneakin' up behind a gent like a dang coyote!"

"Doc Benson give you uh chance tuh draw, an' yuh dogged it," the marshal drawled. "You was tellin' lies about Doc, an' yuh didn't pack the sand tuh back up yore wawa!"

"He hit me when I wasn't lookin'!" The slender outlaw screamed the denial as his right hand hooked into a talon above the ivory-handled gun on his leg.

"Besides which, yuh jest made uh crack about gittin' me come dark," the marshal continued softly, as though he had not been interrupted. "Like yore pard, Bull Haynes, said, they ain't no time like th' present."

Bronk Walters nudged Black and whispered from the corner of his mouth. Cole Ward smiled; he knew that the two robbers thought that he knew nothing about the Contention hold-up. Tuscon smiled crookedly and straightened up from his crouch.

"I don't want no ruckus with the law," he began smoothly. "It was th' likker talkin', Maverick. S'pose we let it pass an' have a drink together?"

"I'm kinda choicy about who I drinks with," the Texan answered. "I never drinks with uh gent when I'm about tuh put him under arrest!"

The miners began to fall back out of the line of fire. They knew Walters and Black; had heard plenty about this tall Texan who was known all over the Southwest as the Law Maverick. Bronk Walters tried to appear surprised as he took a step forward.

"What yuh mean, Maverick?" he growled. "What for you goin' to arrest my pard, Tuscon?"

"For robbery an' murder," Cole Ward answered quietly. "Them two men at th' Contention Mine both died. Both of you jiggers was recognized before yuh lit uh shuck toward th' San Pedro."

His blue eyes held steady as the tall Buckaroo stepped to one side away from his pard. Tuscon Black was again in the gunman's crouch with both hands palmed down above the grips of his guns.

"Up them dew claws! Th' law speakin,' gents!"

Tuscon Black was grinning horribly with his battered lips as his little black eyes glittered with hatred and fear. He knew the reputation of this Law Maverick, but there was no chance to withdraw his bid now. He had one chance, and he took it with a gambler's prayer in his heart. Both hands plunged down to the guns that seemed to leap up to meet his taloned fingers. The Texan's hands blurred in an arc. He drew and fired without pause from the hips, and the slender killer jerked back before crumpling to the sawdust. Again the right hand gun of the marshal flamed with a roar to spin the half-drawn forty-four from the fingers of the big bronk buster.

Walters raised his hands above his head with haste as the Texan watched him with frosty blue eyes; ready to throw another shot if he went for the left-hand gun. A movement on the floor sent another shot crashing through the smoke. Tuscon Black had drawn his knee up under his chin with right hand snaking toward the hideout in his boot. The derringer slipped from his fingers as the killer's body jerked back under the impact of the forty-five slug. The thin legs straightened twitchingly and became still as a hollow rattle sounded in his throat.

The tall Texan was crouching forward with thumbs dogging the heavy hammers of his smoking six-guns. His long face was stiff and expressionless except for the blue eyes that seemed to burn with a frosty light in the deep sockets.

"Th' law speakin', gents. Do I hear any objections to th' sentence ole Judge Colt jest passed?"

The red-shirted miners shook their heads dazedly. Here was law and justice without tricky politics, and being miners, they were in sympathy with the owners of the Contention Mine that had been held up. A bearded giant expressed the sentiments of the crowd as he took a step toward Bronk Walters.

"They's a big cottonwood down by th' river with a crooked limb," he growled. "Let's string this other dirty son up by the neck!"

A low growl of anger came from the crowd as they started toward the prisoner. The tall Texan leaped forward and covered the mob with his guns as he jerked his head toward the door. Bronk Walters was pale as he leaped toward his protector, and the voice of the deputy marshal stopped the crowd.

"Stand back! Th' law speakin', gents. This man is my prisoner, an' he goes tuh Tombstone for trial. I'll shoot th' fust man what makes uh move!"

The bearded giant hesitated as the right-hand forty-five lined up on his heart. For a moment he stared into the muzzle; shrugged his heavy shoulders with resignation.

"You done saved th' state uh heap of expense this mornin', Maverick," he growled. "Might jest as well save some more. This long-ridin' son is guilty as hell, an' Ed Brand was an ole pard of mine!"

"I know all that, Jake," the marshal answered. "But this man has done surrendered, an' he's entitled to uh trial!"

He holstered his left-hand gun as he spoke and reached for his handcuffs. Bronk Walters thrust his hands behind his back; a pair of clicks seemed to satisfy the threatening miners. The Texan backed to the door with his prisoner and addressed the nearest bartender.

"Slide around there an' search that body. These jiggers took clost tuh fifteen thousand!"

The bartender leaned over the body and drew a sack of gold from the flannel shirt. He slid it across the smooth floor and the Texan stopped it with his foot. Then he picked up the gold and tucked it in the prisoner's shirt and waved his gun toward the batwings.

"Outside," he growled. "So long, gents, an' thanks for not interferin' with uh officer. This gent will git his needin's all square an' proper!"

Outside he boosted Walters on the bandit's horse and led the animal down the street to Hop Sing's. Making the bridle reins fast to the horn of his own saddle, he swung up and headed toward the bridge across the San Pedro. He smiled when he looked back and saw a crowd of miners from the Gold Nugget patrolling the narrow street with six-guns in their hands. Charleston was full of outlaws; friends of Black Curly and Tuscon Black. He pounded across the planks of the bridge with his prisoner and swung back toward Tombstone. The long arm of the law was beginning to reach out!

CHAPTER V

THE BENSON STAGE

Doc Benson shrugged his thin shoulders into a corner of Arizona Kate's sofa in the private parlor of Tombstone's Queen of the night. A tall woman snuggled down beside the thin gambler, her brown eyes soft as she stroked the long delicate fingers resting on her arm. In spite of her calling, Arizona Kate was a beautiful woman. Deep of bosom and full hips; hard as nails in her dealings with the rough men who came to her house with the two red lights above the front porch. Softhearted as a child to anyone in distress, and her one passion in life was the gray-eyed gambler whom men knew as Doc Benson.

"Two-gun Nolan was here last night," she whispered. "I don't talk

much about what I see, but he slapped Virgie around and I drove him off with a gun!"

Doc Benson smiled. Many a time he had seen Kate handle the badmen of the silver town, and it was not often that she asked for help. Now he waited in silence for her to tell him what was on her mind. Doc Benson had never been known to show emotion, but with this strange woman he was a different person.

"You still on th' square with me, Kate?"

Her arms went about his neck as she whispered softly, "You and me were raised different than this, Doc. Both of us from good families, and look at us now. We'll roast in hell, sweetheart. But as God is my judge, I've never cheated. You believe me?"

The tall cold gambler drew her close and kissed her. "You and Cole Ward are the only two square-shooters I've met in a fairly long life," he answered quietly. "I'd go to hell for either of you. You are what you are, Kate, and that don't include being a liar. Shoot th' works an' I'll copper your bet!"

Her brown eyes glowed with a strange fire. "That goes double," she whispered. "That tall Texan don't say much, but he's the pure metal. I'm not forgetting that he killed a man to save you even when you was in the wrong!"

"Yeah," the gambler muttered. "It's about th' Maverick, so what?"

"Two-gun was talking with Billy Boggs last night. They aim to get even with the Wards tonight. The play comes off around the Benson stage!"

Doc Benson stiffened. "Hmm! Shotgun Ward is the guard on the Benson stage," he muttered. "Star Ward is town marshal, and Cole is deputy U. S. marshal for th' district. Spill it out, Kate!"

"Hold-up! Two-gun and One-shot Blake are going to hold up the stage. Billy Boggs lays back in th' brush and finishes Star and Cole when they come up!"

"Yeah? Does Cole know all this?"

"Word was sent to Star about th' hold-up," the woman explained. "He thinks he can capture the robbers, but he don't know about Billy Boggs. That's the Ace in the hole, and after the Wards are cleaned out, the bandits ride off with the loot. There's eighty thousand in the boot tonight!"

The tall gambler uncoiled like a spring. "Thanks, Sweet," he muttered. "I'll be seein' you later. After th' Occidental closes up tonight."

"I'll be waiting," she answered simply. "Strap old Betsy under your coat if you deal yourself a hand!"

Doc Benson grinned as he strolled slowly down Tough Nut Street and crossed up an alley to the jail. Cole Ward was just dismounting with his prisoner, and Shotgun Ward was lolling in the shade with double-barrelled shotgun across his knees. The gambler jerked his head as he passed the stage guard and walked into the office. Shotgun got up and stretched; followed him in as Star Ward closed the cell door and listened to the Maverick explain the simple details of the capture. The three brothers turned to Doc Benson as they read the silent message in his gray eyes; hunkered down around the scarred desk as he dropped his eyelids.

"Raid on th' stage tonight," Shotgun whispered. "I got sixteen buckshot to th' barrel in that ole gun."

"Me an' Cole rides up an' throws down on Two-gun Nolan an' One-shot Blake," Star Ward took up the cue. "Eighty thousand in th' boot!"

"Then Billy Boggs cuts down on you from th' brush," Doc Benson whispered. "After which the three hold-ups takes th' loot an' rides up th' San Simon for a split."

Star Ward and Shotgun stiffened. "So! Where'd yuh git th' low-down," Star asked quietly.

"Kate heard One-shot an' Two-gun makin' medicine last night," the gambler answered. "So I'll just ease back there in th' brush an' take care of young Billy. Th' show must go on, gents!"

Doc Benson rode out toward Mustang Pass in the twilight. The Benson stage would leave within the hour, and the tall gambler hummed a song he had heard in the Bird Cage a few nights before. The sawed-off shotgun was strapped to his right shoulder under the black frock coat, and the gambler's eyes were soft as he thought of the woman who had entered his life against all the ethics of society. At Mustang Pass he cut away from the stage road and tied his roan back in a pocket between giant rocks. For a long time he hunkered down beside the grazing horse; came to his feet when the delicate ears lifted and pointed to the rear. The gambler was gone like a shadow as the intelligent gelding went back to his grazing, and the still of twilight covered the distant peaks with a purple haze.

Two broad-brimmed hats flickered through the dusk and disappeared. Doc Benson smiled to himself as his keen gray eyes watched the road. Another hat bobbed into view; disappeared in the brush on his side of the road. Then the gambler was creeping forward like a snake to avoid waving the brush-tops. The rattle of wheels sounded down in the valley. The Benson stage would soon be toiling up the long grade.

Not a sound broke the stillness as the gambler worked his way forward. Cholla cactus and giant Sahuaro with ghostly arms waved at him in the deepening dusk. The squeak of harness leather became louder, and then the gambler saw the lone watcher in a little dip just below him. Billy Boggs was watching the road, his Spencer carbine shoved out on a rock before him. A shadowy form rose up and rushed like a vagrant wind before the ambusher could turn. A clubbed forty-five thudded down on his head as the gambler delivered his surprise attack.

Down in the pass the driver urged his six sweating horses up the steep climb; drew them to a stop at the crest of the pull. No shotgun guard rode on the box beside him, and he raised his arms obediently with the ribbons in his hands when a sharp voice barked a command.

"Hist them grub hooks. Make a move an' it will be yore last!"

Two masked men stepped out from the brush beside the road as the driver set the heavy brake. Each had a brace of heavy six-guns in his fists, and one of them turned to the coach while his partner covered the driver.

"Come out of that stage with hands over yore heads!"

A blinding flash leaped from the narrow window as the sullen voice of a shotgun roared. The outlaw floated to the side of the road and dropped in a limp huddle. A soft voice spoke as the other bandit wheeled.

"Drop 'em or git dropped!"

The bandit let the heavy forty-four slide from his sweating palms as Cole Ward stepped from the coach with the double-barrelled shotgun cradled against his hip. Two horsemen rode up the steep road and dismounted. Star Ward stepped forward and tore the mask from the prisoner, and Two-gun Nolan sneered as his face was exposed. Shotgun Ward leaned over the fallen bandit and stripped the mask to show the white face of One-shot Blake.

"That's that," the deputy marshal growled. "Yuh talk too much with yore mouth, Two-gun."

"Mebbe," the bandit snarled. "Yuh never kin tell!"

His eyes kept swinging unconsciously to the brush across the road. He stepped back with a curse when

Doc Benson parted the brush and came through; gasped when the gambler threw the rifle of Billy Boggs to the ground.

"Caught uh *banditto* back there in th' brush, Maverick," the gambler announced calmly. "He was waitin' to crack down with that old Spencer when these jiggers pulled uh fake surrender. Both of 'em has a extra brace of sixes in their boots!"

He reached down and extracted a pair of forty-fours from the half-boots of Two-gun Nolan while Cole Ward held the drop with the shotgun. Star Ward stepped forward and clicked a pair of cuffs around the bandit's wrists after twisting the heavy arms behind the prisoner's back. Two-gun Nolan looked dazed.

"Where at's Billy?" he half whispered.

The gambler smiled. "Tied up back there among the rocks nursin' uh bad headache," he chuckled.

"You kin thank Kate for all three of us," Shotgun Ward said suddenly.

Two-gun Nolan's eyes darkened as Doc Benson swore softly. Shotgun had unthinkingly betrayed a confidence.

"Arizona Kate, eh?" the bandit sneered. "Trust a woman to talk!"

The gambler calmly drew back his coat and swung the strapped sawed-off into his hands. His gray eyes were merciless and cold as Cole Ward stepped forward quickly and pushed the gun aside.

"Not that, Doc! This man is uh federal prisoner!"

"He'll squawk his head off," the gambler muttered. "That was ah fool play of yours, Shotgun!"

"Turn that dang scatter-gun on me," the messenger answered quickly. "I got it comin' after what you done for us, Doc!"

Doc Benson swung the gun under his coat, turned on his heel and disappeared in the brush. When he returned he was dragging Billy Boggs behind him by the collar. The young bandit was not more than nineteen, but his young face was twisted with killer's rage as he worked against his bonds.

"Let me loose! I'll fight th' three of you Wards single-handed," he screamed. "I'll git you fer what you done to Buck!"

"You'll git uh long spell over in Yuma," Cole Ward answered coldly. "Yuh young dry-gulchin' snake!"

Cole Ward turned to his brother. "Git up there on the box an' light out fer Benson," he said quietly. "Ole Shorty is half an hour late now. We'll take care of these fellers an' see they git their come-uppances!"

Star Ward rounded up the horses as the stage whirled away in the dusk. The prisoners' feet were tied under the bellies of their mounts, with bridle reins fastened to the saddle horns of their captors. The body of One-shot Blake was draped across his saddle after the horse had been blinded with a jumper.

An hour later the little procession entered Tombstone and stopped at the jail. The two prisoners were put in separate cells; the body of the dead bandit left lying on the sidewalk as an object lesson until Buryin' Mike came to claim it for Boot Hill. The three men looked up as heavy feet clumped into the office, and the eyes of Doc Benson grew cold again as he stared at Sheriff Boles. The sheriff ignored him as he addressed the deputy U. S. marshal.

"What you got here?"

"You guess," Cole Ward answered dryly. "Th' daid one is One-shot Blake."

"Hold-up?"

"How'd yuh know?" Cole Ward countered quickly.

The sheriff's face grew red. "You got to give a man a chance to surrender," he blustered. "I'll see Charley Dade about this!"

"Yeah," Star Ward cut in. "We took two prisoners up there in

Mustang Pass where that hold-up came off."

"Billy Boggs an' Two-gun Nolan," Cole Ward added. "You know them gents, Sher'ff?"

"I'll take th' prisoners," the sheriff answered. "As sheriff of Cochise County."

"Not tonight, yuh won't," Cole Ward contradicted. "I happen tuh be a federal officer workin' under orders from th' gov'ment of th' United States. This here ain't got nothin' tuh do with politics, Sher'ff."

A quiet voice interrupted from the deeper shadows. "That twenty-four hours about up, Jack Boles?"

The heckled sheriff whirled to face the tall gambler. "I've changed my mind about you," he answered. "Seein' as you helped th' forces of law an' order bring in known bandits."

"Thanks," Doc Benson answered dryly. "That saves me th' trouble of killin' you, Boles. I never did like you, an' I never will. But if you want to eat crow she's all one to me. What I said about you still holds good!"

"We'll talk about that later," the sheriff blustered. "Right now there is more important things to do for the good of Cochise County."

"Well, evenin' to yuh, Sheriff," Cole Ward interrupted dryly. "I got tuh make out the papers on these bandits before I turn in!"

CHAPTER VI

RED LIGHTS FOR DANGER

Doc Benson sat in the Lookout's chair in the Oriental watching the play at the long table. Some instinct made him glance at the old clock on the wall behind the bar just as the gong struck the hour of midnight. The gambler turned his head with the same movement to stare through the back door at the red lights of a long low house on Tough Nut Street. He slid from the tall chair as his long legs straightened out; gray eyes staring at the two red lights which winked three times as though some one were covering them with a book and then removing it to make a flashing signal.

The gambler moved across the floor like a gliding shadow to disappear into the lot behind the saloon. Now the lights were steady as Doc Benson paused at a side door, found the knob and pushed gently. Not a sound as he stepped through and closed the door with his left hand and glided to one side to place his thin shoulders against the wall.

His gray eyes were deadly and cold as he stared at the three men in the back sitting room. Arizona Kate was strapped hand and foot, lying on the sofa along the far wall. The father of Billy Boggs was bending over her with a knife in his hand. Another outlaw named Slim Connors was watching with a sneer on his thin face. Frank Haynes held a six-gun in his left hand; his right tied in a sling. Old man Boggs was growling savagely at the defiant woman as he held the knife against her throat.

"So it was you what talked with your mouth? Now we want to know where you keep your sock or you gits your purty neck slit."

Arizona Kate stared into the gray eyes of Doc Benson without changing expression. "Try to find out," she answered calmly.

Frank Haynes glanced at the door, stiffened when he saw the silent gambler. He wheeled to bring his left hand in line; dropped to the floor when Benson shifted his feet and shook a derringer into his palm. The tiny forty-one roared once, and Frank Haynes buckled his knees and sank to the floor. Slim Connors wheeled with a startled oath and went for his guns as the tall gambler discarded the derringer and slapped down for the gun on his right hip. Both men fired at the same time, and the gambler's left arm snapped back as a slug grazed his shoulder. The outlaw staggered back; dropped when the heavy forty-five roared again to knock him spinning.

Old man Boggs raised his gun deliberately and took aim. A gun roared from the front door behind the old desperado before the gambler could face his third enemy. Old man Boggs yelped as the gun leaped from his clutching fingers when the heavy slug struck it. He wheeled to face Cole Ward as his left hand hurtled down to palm his second six-gun; snarled like a cornered wolf when the deputy marshal boomed a sharp command.

"Drop it; yo're covered!"

The old desperado grinned hideously as his thin lips curled back to show broken yellowed fangs in the corners of his mouth. Drooling like a rabied wolf, he jerked the heavy gun from his holster and snapped a shot from the hip. The tall Texan watched each movement with cold blue eyes; pressed trigger just as the outlaw's gun cleared leather. Old man Boggs took a quick step backward as the slug slapped him in the left breast; buckled his knees and sagged to the floor when the gun slipped from his fingers to thud to the carpet.

It had all happened in a matter of shifting movements over the space of seconds since Doc Benson had stepped through the side door. Now the three outlaws were lifeless on the floor of Arizona Kate's private room, staining the expensive carpet with their blood. A chattering crowd of girls were gathered in the hall behind the deputy marshal, watching Doc Benson cutting the thongs that held the night queen prisoner, with the huge bowie knife that old man Boggs had held against her throat.

"Doc! You're hurt, dear!"

The tall gambler smiled as he drew the woman to him with his right arm. "Just a scratch," he shrugged. "When I saw the lights winking I thought I was too late. They hurt you, Kate?"

The woman shuddered. "Billy Boggs got word to his father from the jail," she whispered. "They knew that I tipped you and Cole about that trap back in Mustang Pass, but they didn't hurt me any to speak of."

The scantily clad girls shrank back against the walls as a gun-butt hammered against the front door. Cole Ward stepped aside to hug the wall as his right hand found the latch and turned the key. Sheriff Boles barged through with a gun in each hand; stopped in his tracks when he saw the deputy marshal.

"Might have known you'd be here," he growled. "Drop that gun!"

Cole Ward sighed. "You either put them guns away or start shootin'," he said quietly.

Boles tried to change the subject as he wheeled on Doc Benson. "You're under arrest for the killin' of ole man Boggs," he shouted. "I'll guarantee you a fair trial!"

"Jest uh minute," Ward interrupted. "Did you see him kill ole man Boggs?"

"The corpse speaks for itself," Boles answered. "I'm warnin' you not to interfere with an officer in the discharge of his duty!"

"That goes two ways," the Texan drawled. "As depity marshal of Cochise County, I got here before you did. I kilt th' ole wolf while dischargin' my duty. I give him uh chance tuh surrender before I shot the gun from his hand, an' he kept goin' tuh draw his second iron. It ain't none of yore business, but right then was when I cut down on him!"

Sheriff Boles holstered his guns

and backed toward the door. His exit was blocked by a big man who pushed him forward and stepped into the hall to stare at the tall Texan. Cole Ward straightened slightly as he holstered his gun; smiled with his eyes as he stared into the face of Black Curly.

"I'm waitin' for you tuh draw, Curly."

The big outlaw grinned contemptuously as his big hands patted the empty holsters on his bull-hide chaps. The smile left the eyes of the marshal as his deep voice boomed across the low room.

"You better git yoreself dressed, Curly," he stated bluntly. "Yore number is up even if I can't prove all th' things I know about you. I'm tellin' yuh now tuh git out or git kilt!"

The burly outlaw stared in silence. Black curly hair and black mustaches; glittering black eyes set deep in his beef-colored face under the droopy brim of his old Stetson. Sheriff Boles stepped forward again with a low growl.

"I'm the law in Cochise County," he told Cole Ward. "An' Curly helped elect me to the office. More than that, he helped me collect the taxes where I didn't have a Chinaman's chance of doin' it on my own. You better make your charges more specific, Ward!"

"Does that mean yo're linin' up with this owl hoot gent?" the Texan drawled slowly.

"You got any proof that he's ridin' the owl hoot trail?" the sheriff countered.

"What's he doin' here right now?" Ward asked. "Him with empty holsters while part of his gang is torturin' uh woman?"

"We hears shootin,' an' we come to help enforce that new town law," Boles answered. "Like usual we finds two-three dead men instead of arrests like a officer is s'posed to do!"

"I'll carry the law like I sees it, an' I ain't never yet asked uh long-rider tuh help me with my chores," the Texan answered. "There's three of yore men layin' there, Curly."

The outlaw shrugged. "There's plenty of men," he sneered. "I was goin' to come down an' post bail fer Two-gun Nolan an' Billy Boggs. The sher'ff said it could be fixed tonight."

"The sher'ff kin guess again," Ward answered coldly. "Them two goes to the Pen at Yuma. They was caught red-handed holdin' up the Benson stage."

"Them two is out right now," the sheriff contradicted. "I got an order from Judge Gray, an' my depity went down there to the jail an' served the paper on Star Ward."

Arizona Kate reached down and took one of Doc Benson's guns from the holster. Then she took a quick step forward and threw down on the sheriff and Black Curly.

"This might not be considered a very respectable dump, but it's too good for you and your friend," she told the sheriff. "*Vamos,* and don't come back unless you want to stop lead."

"I'll go where I damn please," Boles snarled. "You pull anything crooked an' I'll take you as soon as I would a man!"

"Right then is when Cochise County needs a new sheriff," Doc Benson interrupted, and his voice was cold and deadly. "You're uh politician, Boles. Yuh better hand in your star an' stick to something you know."

"Outside," Cole Ward ordered sharply. "You better walk down to the jail with me an' verify them papers, Boles!"

His blue eyes were narrowed and watchful as he pushed the two men through the door. Not once did he touch his guns on the way to the jail, but Black Curly stayed on the outside of the walk farthest away from the angry Texan. Star Ward was waiting in the office, and he ignored the two men as he addressed his brother.

"Judge Gray issued an order turn-in' them two road agents loose. The paper said that Sher'ff Boles would be responsible!"

"You let 'em go?"

Star Ward nodded. "Had to do it," he growled angrily. "Joe Arnold took 'em with him."

"We made uh li'l mistake," the deputy marshal sighed. "We should of kilt the both of 'em when they was holdin' up the stage. Next time we'll know better."

"They won't be no next time," the outlaw sneered. "Ain't that right, Sher'ff?"

"You're covered, Ward! Git them hands up!"

The tall Texan spun around as the sheriff shouted the command. Joe Arnold was standing on the sidewalk with two men, and all three of them held the drop. Black Curly reached inside his shirt and produced a forty-five as Boles drew his weapons and covered Star Ward. The deputy marshal sneered his contempt.

"Billy Boggs an' Two-gun Nolan helpin' yore depity," he growled. "This shore is one hell of uh country fer law."

"Yeah," the sheriff agreed. "So we're givin' you an' your brothers a chance to go back the same way you come in. The kind of law we got suits us, an' we kin manage to hang an' rattle without no outside help."

"The U. S. marshal put me in here," the Texan drawled slowly. "I'll leave when he tells me to, an' not uh minute sooner!"

"I got a warrant for your arrest for the murder of Johnny McGuire," the sheriff growled.

A cold flat voice interrupted him from the darkness. "You gents better drop them guns an' reach for the blue heaven before I turn ole Betsy loose in your midst. I'm countin' three, gents!"

"Doc Benson!"

The sheriff and Black Curly dropped their weapons as the tall Texan shouted at the gambler in the darkness. The three men outside dropped their weapons slowly and elevated their hands as Cole Ward filled his hands and cocked the heavy hammers. The gambler came forward with his sawed-off at his hip; waited without speaking while the Texan advanced until he stood before Boles. Cole Ward holstered his guns and slapped the sheriff deliberately in the face.

"Goin' tuh arrest me, eh?" he growled. "With uh bunch of long-riders backin' up yore play in the name of law an' order."

The sheriff rubbed his cheek and stammered. "I—I did not. Me an' my depity made this play, an' I'll git you if it takes me a lifetime!"

He rushed forward with flailing arms as the tall Texan side-stepped and brought his right fist up from the hip. The blow landed flush on the sheriff's jaw and dropped him flat in the dust. Cole Ward turned to the burly outlaw with blue eyes sparkling.

"You wantin' some of the same?" he drawled.

"You hold the winnin' hand," Curly muttered. "C'mon boys; let's *vamos!*"

The two guns leaped to the Texan's hands like flashes of light. "Not so fast," he growled. "I'm arrestin' Two-gun Nolan an' Billy Boggs for impersonatin' officers. Put 'em back in the cells, Star!"

Joe Arnold jerked his head to Black Curly and picked up the sheriff's boots. The outlaw took the unconscious man's shoulders; packed him up the street to the Oriental while the Law Maverick stood in the door of the jail with a wide grin on his tanned face.

CHAPTER VII

LAW AND JUSTICE

Thin lips smiling coldly under the tawny mustaches, Cole Ward listened to the verdict of the Coroner's jury impaneled to determine the cause of death in the

case of One-shot Blake. The old stage driver had disappeared under threat of death, and Black Curly was openly triumphant when the Coroner brought out the fact that the three Wards were brothers and that Doc Benson had allied himself on their side. Two-gun Nolan testified that he and his friends had merely stopped the stage to find out if Black Curly was on it, despite the fact that the outlaw leader always traveled by horse and had never been known to ride the stage.

Star Ward glanced at Shotgun as his thin lips tightened. Cole Ward stared straight ahead at the door through which the jury would return. Three known outlaws were on that jury with one of them acting as foreman. The Coroner took the report and read it aloud.

> We find that the deceased came to his death accidentally from gunshot wounds at the hands of Federal officers.
> Shorty Devlin, Foreman.

The deputy marshal jerked his head at his brothers and walked stiffly from the crowded room. Back in the office of the jail he turned to them with blue eyes blazing.

"Yuh know what that means?" he asked.

"Means that Billy Boggs an' Two-gun is goin' to be acquitted," Star Ward answered grimly. "So what?"

"Seems tuh be uh dif'funce over here between law an' justice," the tall Texan murmured. "An' my orders was tuh see that justice was done. Them two stands trial this afternoon, an' they'll crowd their luck before sundown."

Star Ward sat down behind the scarred desk and began to clean his guns. Shotgun would be out on the Benson stage before the trial terminated, but he knew that Doc Benson would be on hand to back up any play the deputy marshal started. With the forces of the law divided against each other in Tombstone, Justice wore a mask over her face like the road agents who robbed the stages with impunity.

After dinner the deputy marshal went straight to the court room with his prisoners. An hour later both men were acquitted by the jury selected by Sheriff Boles. Star Ward walked stiffly beside the deputy marshal as they returned to the jail staring straight ahead, and the sun was sinking behind the Dragoons when Doc Benson strolled slowly through the swinging doors of the Alhambra saloon and headed toward the jail. Cole Ward glanced at the gambler's face; waited for him to speak.

"Show-down," the tall gambler drawled softly. "Two-gun is goin' to out-speed you when you come up for your evenin' drink. Young Billy Boggs is sidin' him."

The deputy marshal's face showed no expression. "How about the rest of them long-riders what sat in on the show this afternoon?" he asked quietly.

"Witnesses for Two-gun," the gambler answered simply. "You done served notice on Two-gun, an' he aims to git you the minute yuh show through the doors. After which Sheriff Boles pops up to declare the play self defense."

"United States Marshal Charley Dade tole me tuh see that justice was done here regardless of what they called law in these parts," Cole Ward answered musingly. "Them two held up that stage an' they figgered on killin' the three of us Wards. They're guilty as hell, gents."

"Keno," Star Ward murmured. "What's the play, Maverick?"

"They figger us tuh come through the doors at six o'clock like usual," the deputy marshal answered. "It's five now, an' it might upset them some if we was early. I'll take the side door while you an' Doc comes

through the front when yuh hear them jiggers stop talkin'. Two-gun kin have law, but he's goin' tuh git justice at the same time."

"He's fast," the gambler warned. "Watch his eyes, Maverick!"

Cole Ward did not answer as he walked out to the tie-rack and mounted his horse. He rode down Allen Street in the opposite direction from the Alhambra; doubled back at Fremont Street and kept to the shadows while Star Ward and Doc Benson walked up Allen Street to the saloon. Leaving the tall bay in a clump of alamosas, the deputy marshal slipped down an alley and paused at the side door to listen to the shouting voices within. Then he turned the knob and stepped inside to place his back against the wall.

His tanned face was stiff as he glanced over the crowd. Billy Boggs and Two-gun Nolan were at the end of the bar facing the swinging doors. The long bar was lined with miners and cattlemen, and the Texan smiled when he saw the little group of outlaws along the wall behind Nolan and Boggs. Sheriff Boles was nowhere in sight, and Cole Ward smiled when he thought of the sheriff's part in the trap. Boles would show up promptly at six o'clock, because the deputy marshal had never varied in his habit of drinking at that hour. Now he began to slide along the wall of the card room until he reached the arch separating it from the saloon.

A single houseman sat behind a roulette wheel stacking up chips. The marshal recognized him; Johnny-Behind-The-Deuce. Not much more than five feet tall, but deadly with knife and six-gun. The little dealer glanced up and jerked when he saw the tall Texan. Then his left hand knocked over a pile of chips and sent them clattering to the floor. Cole Ward stopped instantly and faced the bar-room as Two-gun Nolan whirled around. The gunman held poised as he recognized his enemy, and the Texan smiled with his eyes when the conversation died away all over the long room. Smiled again when the batwings swung open to admit Star Ward and Doc Benson.

"Heard you was lookin' for me," he drawled softly. "Thought I'd git here early so you wouldn't be nervous!"

"Like usual, yuh sneak through the back," Nolan sneered. "Like a dang maverick sneakin' through the brakes."

"Mavericks live uh long time," the Texan retorted. "They learn tuh depend on themselves no matter where they are."

"We was acquitted this afternoon," Nolan sneered. "In spite of you."

"Mebbe not," the Texan drawled. "Ole Jedge Colt ain't had his say yet. You jiggers was caught red-handed, an' yo're guilty as hell."

"You're considered plumb sudden on the draw," the big gunman answered softly. "Billy will drop a hat to settle the argument. Suit you?"

"Keno," the Texan agreed. "The rest of you gents keep yore hands away from yore holsters if yuh wants tuh stay healthy. Yo're covered from the front!"

The group of outlaws along the back wall jerked their eyes to the swinging doors; stopped the hands that were stealing down toward the guns on their legs. Doc Benson was braced on the balls of his feet with the sawed-off shotgun against his hip. Star Ward had filled both hands, and Two-gun Nolan sneered as he swung his eyes back to Cole Ward.

"You coppered your bet like a tinhorn," he sneered, "an' she's your play!"

"Yore deal," the Texan corrected. "You called the turn an' I got openers. I'll play these on uh showdown!"

He tapped the handles of his six-guns to emphasize his words; dropped his hands as his shoulders

twitched forward in a crouch to face the big gunman. Nolan shifted his feet and muttered to the young outlaw at his side. Billy Boggs stepped aside and swept the droopy Stetson from his head. Cole Ward was not watching Boggs. His blue eyes were slitted in a steady stare that watched the eyes of his enemy. He knew the usual procedure. The hat would be held up for a pause while one could count to three, and when it dropped to the floor both fighters would reach for their guns.

Billy Boggs raised the hat above his head, opened his fingers without a pause and dropped the hat. Two-gun Nolan was already starting his draw, and the right hand of the deputy marshal blurred down in a sweeping arc that lifted the heavy forty-five while his thumb was dogging the hammer back. A blasting roar snuffed out the muzzle-bloom that flamed briefly against the Texan's hip before the barrel of Nolan's gun had cleared the lip of his holster. The big gunman sagged in the middle, and Billy Boggs reached down to pick up his hat.

It had all happened while one could count three. The slender Billy Boggs came up with a gun in each hand just as Cole Ward sent two shots crashing across the smoke-filled room. The two guns thudded to the sawdust as the treacherous youngster was hurled back under the double impact of the heavy slugs. Billy Boggs crashed on his back and did not move while the Texan crouched above his smoking weapon. A clutching hand shot forward from the huddle on the floor where Two-gun Nolan had slipped to a sitting position. The deputy marshal watched that hand straighten out slowly to bring up the forty-five; shot swiftly just before the gunman's finger tightened on the trigger. Two-gun Nolan screamed hoarsely as the slug tore through his hand and hurled the gun against the wall where it bounced and exploded to send a bullet through the low ceiling.

The front doors were shoved apart as Sheriff Boles rushed into the saloon with six-guns in both hands. Star Ward stepped up and jammed the muzzle of his weapon against the broad back. Boles paled and let his guns slip to the floor; stuttered angrily when the gun was removed from his spine.

"Yuh can't do this, Ward! I'm the law here in Cochise County!"

"This ain't law," Cole Ward drawled in his deep voice. "Law is what these jiggers got this afternoon. This here is what yuh might call justice!"

"I'll take it up with the guv'nor," the sheriff sputtered. "Men gits acquitted in a fair trial, an' you gun them down the same day. This here will mean your star!"

"What yo're talkin' about is politics," the deputy marshal answered quietly. "I don't know nothin' about politics, but my orders was tuh clean out the outlaws in Tombstone. So fur I've acted in self defense like you know."

"You never give them fellers a chanct, an' you knows it," the sheriff shouted. "Or you'd be kickin' up hot ashes on the devil's playground right now!"

"Yeah," the Texan agreed. "The li'l play was tuh come off prompt at six o'clock. Then you was tuh walk in with Black Curly an' call it self defense, but you know how nervous uh gent sits waiting around tuh git hisself kilt. So I come up uh li'l head of time. Go ahead an' speak yore piece; it's still self defense!"

"I'll git you Wards out of here if I have to call in the troops from Fort Huachuca," the sheriff blustered. "I'll git the guv'nor tuh do it."

"The soldiers are under the federal law," the marshal corrected again. "Bein' uh federal officer I might call 'em myself if I need 'em. Yuh stop tuh think of that?"

Two-gun Nolan groaned at the end

of the bar. "Tell Curly—he gut-shot me," he muttered hoarsely. "He pulled—uh gun sneak—tuh beat the hat!"

The sheriff scowled as he faced the tall Texan. "That there's murder," he announced grimly. "You gents see this?"

"We saw it!"

The outlaws answered in a chorus as they glared at the deputy marshal. The tall Texan smiled as he covered them with his six-guns, and his slow drawl reached across the room to a group of cattlemen fresh in from the Texas trail.

"What do you Tejanos say?"

"Self defense," a grizzled Texan answered promptly. "It was that big jigger what tried for a gun sneak when his pard dropped that ole Stetson without no stop at all. Stay with 'em, Maverick, an' remember the Alamo!"

"It's a good thing you got friends to swear for you," Boles growled. "Or I'd take you in right now!"

"Not now nor no other time," Cole Ward contradicted softly. "But at least I don't have tuh hunt up uh bunch of long-ridin' rustlers tuh lie for me. What yuh seen today is uh li'l sample of the difference between law an' justice as seen through the sights of ole Judge Colt, an' these outlaws is goin' tuh git some more of the same. You can tell that to yore pard, Black Curly!"

He stalked across the room and brushed past the staring sheriff. Boles blocked his way and pointed to Two-gun Nolan on the floor.

"You got to git him to a sawbones," he growled.

"Not me," the Texan shrugged. "He'll be dead in uh hour, an' he had it comin' for tryin' uh sneak. He's yore pard, Sheriff, so figger it out for yoreself. I'm hongry now, an' it's time tuh eat."

He shouldered the angry sheriff aside and passed out through the swinging doors. Star Ward holstered his guns and backed out with eyes fixed on the outlaws. Doc Benson smiled coldly with his gray eyes as the tunnels of his sawed-off swung slowly back and forth, after which he backed through the doors and joined the two Wards. Shoulder to shoulder the three clanked down the street under the board awnings and entered the dining room of the Grand Hotel.

CHAPTER VIII

OUTLAW GUNS

Cole Ward frowned at the message in his hand from old Ed Schiefflen, owner of the Contention Mine. The old miner expected an attack on his bullion shipment, and requested the deputy marshal to ride out to Contention, ten miles back in the hills. The shooting affair in the Alhambra was still being discussed on the streets, and the outlaws had disappeared after taking the bodies of their slain companions to Buryin' Joe's. The deputy marshal reached into a drawer and began to clean one of his six-guns as Star Ward watched him thoughtfully.

"Shotgun will be back soon," he suggested. "Them two road agents got their needin's this afternoon, an' we got them Tejano cattlemen for witnesses. What you worryin' about?"

Cole Ward shrugged. "Because I can't be in two places at once," he answered. "But I got to get out an' see ole Ed. You an' Shotgun look after things till I git back!"

He mounted the tall bay and rode out of town. Doc Benson watched him from his hotel window; smiled to himself as he slipped the heavy guns into his holsters and left the hotel by the back door. The red lights were burning in the long low house on Tough Nut Street, and the gambler entered by the side door and peered into the dark. Arizona Kate usually waited for him in the soft glow of an amber lamp, and the gambler frowned as he called softly.

"Kate! You there?"

A soft groan came to his straining

ears, and the gambler whipped out his right-hand gun as the fingers of his left reached for a match. He struck it, paused, and then lifted the chimney from the little lamp. Then he was on his knees beside the woman on the floor. A dark pool had gathered under her body, and her hand was pressed to her heart where a steady drip was adding to the pool on the carpet. She stopped him when he tried to raise her in his arms; pulled his head down to whisper in his ear.

"Johnny-Behind-The-Deuce! He stabbed me because I warned Cole Ward!"

Doc Benson stared as a cold hand clutched at his heart. His gray eyes were fastened on the woman's face; the only woman he had ever loved. The long lashes fluttered open for a moment as she smiled at him; closed again as the hands fell from her breast. The gambler crushed her to him as his lips pressed against her mouth. Then he laid her on the couch and stood up with hands pressed to the guns on his legs.

Outside in the street running feet were approaching the house, and six-guns exploded before the gambler could reach the door. Star Ward and Shotgun were running rapidly toward four men in the shadows of the front porch. Shotgun threw up his hands and pitched forward as the withering blast of lead flamed out from the dark. Star Ward fired three shots before he also tripped and fell. Then Doc Benson leaped through the door with guns jumping in his hands.

Star Ward had killed one of his attackers before he went down, and the gambler got two more before they could turn to face him. Now his gray eyes were fastened on the tiny figure who whirled to throw a shot. The gambler held his fire and took deliberate aim; pressed the trigger and shot the little man squarely between the eyes. Then he walked slowly forward. At last he stood over the treacherous little gambler, and his right hand flashed in the glow of the red lights as he drew his bowie knife and plunged it into the heart of Johnny-Behind-The-Deuce.

He straightened slowly as his fingers plucked fresh loads from his belt and thumbed them into the loading chambers of his six-guns. A low moan whirled him around and sent him hurrying to the side of Star Ward, the town marshal.

"They got me twice," the wounded man whispered. "Look an' see if Shotgun is finished."

The gambler knelt beside the shotgun messenger and shook his head. "Right through the heart," he whispered. "I'll carry you down to Doc Reed's."

"They'll git you," the wounded man objected. "Me an' Shotgun saw the light winkin', an' come over on the run. They dry-gulched us from the dark before we knew where they were."

"Where's the Maverick?" the gambler asked.

"It was a plant," the town marshal answered. "They decoyed him out to Contention with a letter from Ed Schiefflen. Where's Kate?"

"Dead!"

Star Ward tried to sit up. "Yuh mean they kilt her?" he almost shouted.

The gambler nodded, and his eyes were staring with anger and grief. "Stabbed her because she warned us about that hold-up in Mustang Canyon. It was Johnny-Behind-The-Deuce done it, but he paid!"

The wounded man shuddered. "It was him you used yore knife on?"

"Yeah," the gambler answered without emotion. "Grit your teeth hard!"

He reached down and picked the wounded man up in his long arms.

Star Ward was unconscious when they reached the doctor's office; was still unconscious when a lathered horse slid to a stop at the rail outside. Cole Ward hit the porch floor on his heels and slid into the room where he stopped as the doctor raised a warning hand.

"He hurted bad?"

The doctor nodded. "He'll live, but he's out of the fight for a couple months, Maverick. Bullet above the heart, an' one through his right shoulder. You'll have to take him back in the hills."

The tall Texan turned to the gambler. "Will you do it, Doc?" he asked quietly. "Will yuh git uh light spring wagon up at the O.K. corral?"

"Can we move him tonight?" the gambler asked the doctor.

"Better move him while he's unconscious," the doctor advised. "Where you takin' him, Maverick?"

"Out tuh Ed Schiefflen's place," Ward answered. "It's jest what he needs, an' he'll be safe there. They worked uh plant on me tuhnight when they sent uh letter supposed tuh be from Ed. Who done this, Doc?"

"All dead," the gambler answered laconically. "Johnny-Behind-The-Deuce stabbed Kate through the heart, an' I got him. They laid back in the dark when Star and Shotgun run over to answer the signal, an' Shotgun was dead before he hit the ground. Star got one before he hit the dirt, an' I got the other three."

"You see the sheriff?"

The Texan's face was hard as he asked the question. The gambler shook his head. "He never showed this time," he answered. "What you make of it, Cole?"

"It spells Jack Boles' idea of law," the deputy marshal growled. "Black Curly an' his gang put the sheriff in office, an' he knows he wouldn't stand uh show unless he backed them up. Now I got tuh play her uh lone hand!"

"Yeah?" the gambler asked. "Mebbe you overlooked the new town marshal!"

He pulled his frock coat aside as he spoke; pointed to the star he had removed from Star Ward's vest and pinned to his own. The tall Texan stared at the badge and extended his hand across the body of his unconscious brother.

"Thanks, Doc," he growled. "An' I'm sorry about Kate. She was as fine uh gal as ever I knowed!"

"I'll git th' wagon," the gambler answered gruffly. "We can talk on th' way out to Contention."

The doctor finished his dressings just as Doc Benson returned with a light spring wagon. The three men carried the unconscious town marshal outside and placed him on a feather bed in the wagon. The gambler climbed to the seat and picked up the reins as Cole Ward hunkered down beside his brother, and the horses moved slowly down the street without being noticed in the gloom. Well out from town, the deputy marshal spoke suddenly as though he had thought it all out.

"Take no more chances with them outlaws from now on," he growled harshly. "Our days is numbered here in Tombstone, but we'll finish our job before we go!"

"Yeah," the gambler agreed calmly. "You mean politics, Maverick?"

The deputy marshal nodded grimly. "I'm uh reg'lar United States depity marshal, an' ever' time I tell uh outlaw tuh surrender he goes for his iron. When I beats him to the draw, that hawg-fat politician pops up an' tries tuh arrest me for murder. One of these days he's goin' tuh make his charges stick, an' if they takes my star away from me, the sheriff will have the law all his own way."

"That gives me an idea," Doc Benson answered. "Bein' part of th' law you don't want to gun him down, but those scruples don't extend to yours truly. With him out of the way them

outlaws wouldn't last long. Most of the leaders is dead now."

"All except Black Curly," the deputy muttered. "I was savin' him for last because of what he done to ole Jim Ward, my uncle."

"You never mentioned it but I knew Curly had killed that trail crew, an' rustled three thousand head of longhorns," the gambler answered. "I was wonderin' if you knew?"

"I was on my way over here when I met Marshal Charley Dade in Prescott," Ward admitted quietly. "One by one I've got them fellers in the name of th' law, an' I'll git the rest before I quit."

Doc Benson glanced back over his shoulder and whipped up the horses. "Raiders comin' uh hellin'," he explained quietly. "Looks like Black Curly an' Shorty Devlin in the lead."

Cole Ward muttered angrily. "An' us without our rifles," he groaned. "Yuh got tuh beat 'em to that clump of alamosas down there by the creek or we're in uh tight. Quirt them broom-tails, Doc!"

He drew his six-guns and threw lead at the pursuing horsemen. A rifle spoke sharply, and the bullet whistled over Cole's head as he crouched low in the wagon. Doc Benson was standing up with high heels hooked in the rail as he poured leather into the racing mustangs. Star Ward moaned in his delirium as the light wagon bumped and swayed over the rough road. Then they were among the trees as a band of riders spurred down the long hill from the Contention Mine. The outlaws drew up and fired a volley from their carbines when they saw the riders coming toward them. Doc Benson found the brake and drew the sweating team to a walk as Ed Schiefflen loped up at the head of his men.

"Who you got there, Maverick?" he shouted.

"Star. He was shot while I was out here tuh see you. Doc said he might have uh chance tuh pull through out yere."

"Take him right on up to the house," the old miner answered quickly. "You dang right he'll have a chance out here where he kin breathe, an' Gawd help any of them outlaws what come out to call on him."

"That was Black Curly an' part of his gang," the deputy marshal explained. "Shotgun is daid, an' Curly thought he'd help the sheriff by makin' uh clean sweep."

"Sheriff Boles playin' politics again, eh?" Schiefflen guessed shrewdly. "What you goin' tuh do about it, Maverick?"

"I was sent in here tuh clean out them outlaws," Ward answered stubbornly. "After I finishes th' job I'll be movin' on."

"Maverickin' on to carry th' law to some other tough town," the old miner grinned. "But now you won't dare to go back to Tombstone. You can't fight outlaws an' the law at the same time!"

"I been doin' it up tuh now," the Texan answered. "Me an' Doc will be ridin' back the fust thing in the mornin' if you kin put us up for the night!"

"Here's th' house," the miner announced. "Help carry Star inside, an' you an' Doc Benson can stay as long as you likes. You know your business best, an' I won't try to tell you what to do."

The wounded man was carried to a room and made comfortable in a low bed. Cole Ward dozed in a chair for several hours beside the bed, and it was still dark when he entered the next room and shook Doc Benson by the shoulder. The gambler came to his feet at once, his gray eyes alert and bright in spite of the heavy sleep from which he had been awakened.

"We got to slip into Tombstone an' git our hawsses," the deputy marshal whispered. "Thought we'd better make it before sun-up."

"Keno," the gambler answered

promptly. "Wait till I pull on my boots."

The O.K. Corral was dark when the two men drove the light spring wagon into the big barn. A sleepy hostler took the team; blinked his eyes when he recognized his visitors. He came close to the deputy marshal and whispered hoarsely in a low voice that cracked with excitement.

"They goin' to git you, Tejano," and he shivered with the chill of fear. "They goin' to git you after th' funeral."

"Funerals," Doc Benson corrected softly, and his long white fingers caressed the butts of his guns. "A lady goes to her rest today; a lady that went by the name of Arizona Kate in these heathenish parts!"

"And Shotgun," Cole Ward answered softly. "We'll lay 'em side by each, pard. Shotgun would want it that way, because he was kilt tryin' tuh help her."

CHAPTER IX

BOOT HILL WINS

The two tall gunmen shook hands solemnly in the gloom. Both glanced around when a tousled white head poked up out of the haymow; fierce blue eyes shaded by shaggy brows. Long white handle-bar mustaches drooping to frame stern lips. They both recognized the old Texas cattleman who had witnessed the killing of Billy Boggs and Two-gun Nolan in the saloon.

"I'm puttin' th' six-guns of five Tejanos behind yuh, Maverick," he stated proudly. "We'll see that the lady gits put away proper if we have tuh kill all the long-ridin' rustlers in Arizony tuh do it. An hour after th' funeral you two is on yore own again, cause that's when me an' th' boys is hittin' south down th' Texas trail."

The tall deputy marshal stared into the stern old face and held out his right hand. "I'm thankin' yuh kindly, Jim Bowen," he muttered hoarsely. "Me an' Doc will do the same for you some time. I knew I could count on uh Texan tuh see that the daid was respected!"

Doc Benson was saddling his thoroughbred gelding. He went over each piece of riding gear with care; patted the stock of the Spencer carbine peeping from the boot under the left saddle-skirt. Cole Ward rubbed down his leggy bay and oiled the saddle-fenders; put new lacing in his latigo and mended the throat latch of his bridle. The five Texans left the barn and clanked down the street to the lunch room. When they returned they carried a box with them containing two double orders of ham and eggs for the deputy marshal and Doc Benson.

Allen Street was quiet with the calm that precedes a storm. At eight o'clock Cole Ward mounted his horse and jerked his head toward the door as a black wagon came out of an alley and stopped in front of Buryin' Joe's. Doc Benson fell in beside the marshal as he gigged his horse through the double doors; the five cattlemen falling in behind to trot slowly down the quiet street.

As they reined up beside the black wagon, a thin man of tremendous height walked out from the undertaker's parlor. He was flanked on either side by a seasoned gunfighter, both wearing the crossed belts of the two-gun man. Cold gray eyes in stiff poker faces, the three walked to the wagon and took their seats. The deputy marshal and the gambler fell in behind the wagon with the five Texans following, and the little procession started for the hillside behind Fremont Street.

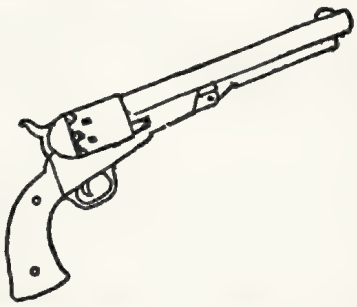
Passing the Bird Cage Opera House, a group of chorus girls and actors bowed their heads and fell in behind. At the Crystal Palace bar several men mounted their horses and joined the procession. At the Oriental and the Alhambra it was the same, and when the solemn parade reached the place known as Boot Hill, twenty

weeping girls waited by the open grave; twenty Magdalenes from the long low house where the two red lights burned nightly on the broad front porch back on Tough Nut Street.

Another party waited there also. Black Curly and Shorty Devlin were surrounded by a dozen leering outlaws perhaps thirty feet from the grave. Buryin' Joe stepped from the black wagon with his two guards at his sides. He faced Black Curly and spoke in a deep voice that boomed like the wind in a cavern as his long hands found the butts of the heavy forty-fives under his long coat.

"Gentlemen; we have come to lay the dead to rest. At this solemn time all enmities are forgotten, or at least laid aside as a token of respect for those who have left this vale of tears. There will be a short service, and the letters R.I.P. means 'Rest in Peace!' If any gent so far forgets himself as to show any gesture of disrespect, that gent will be planted here on Boot Hill with his boots on, and without the benefit of clergy. I trust that I have made myself clear!"

The crying deacon from the Fellowship Church stepped forward and took his place at the head of the grave with open book in his hand. The two guards walked to the rear of the wagon and slid the coffins out until the cattlemen could take the handles. Both boxes were laid on poles across the open grave as every man in the crowd uncovered his head. Black Curly and his men hesitated; removed their Stetsons when the undertaker and his two guards faced them with hands on their six-guns.



Doc Benson stared straight ahead with no emotion on his long face except for the unshed tears in his hard gray eyes. Cole Ward hung his head as his big hands clenched tightly; the Adam's apple in his throat working up and down as he swallowed his grief. The deacon intoned his prayer, and sprinkled dust on the lids as the boxes were lowered with rawhide riatas. As the mound was heaped up, a hysterical girl turned toward the outlaws and screamed a curse upon them.

"You, Black Curly and your pack of wolves; I hope you burn in hell for what you have done to Arizona Kate. I had a dream last night, and they always come true. You will be kicking hot ashes in hell before the sun sets tonight!"

The outlaw ignored her and turned to face Cole Ward. "I'll see you at th' O.K. Corral in an hour!"

He vaulted to the saddle and spurred down the hill before the tall Texan could answer him. Cole Ward was like a man in a stupor. His heavy head still sagged on his big chest with blue eyes closed tightly as he fought for control. Doc Benson took his arm, led him stumbling to his horse and put the bridle reins in the loose fingers. Mounted the black thoroughbred and trotted slowly down the hill toward the jail.

A few minutes later they saw the five Texans heading south toward Texas canyon with their chuck wagon and Hoodlum wagon following. True to their word, they had sided a Texan until the dead were laid away, and now the two men were on their own with a pack of vicious outlaws thirsting for their lives. The tall gambler was cleaning his guns one at a time while the deputy marshal guarded the door. Then he changed places and cleaned the long-barrelled forty-fives until they shone like ebony, after which he thumbed fresh shells into the loading gates and tried the balances. A deep light of dancing flames was burning in his blue eyes when he stood up and snugged the Peacemakers down in the moulded holsters.

"Might be our last ride," he said to the gambler. "You ready?"

Doc Benson smiled with the corners of his mouth. In his deep-set gray eyes one could see the reflection of ice glare. The sawed-off shotgun was strapped to his left shoulder under his frock coat which somehow was pressed immaculate. The gambler patted the grips of his six-guns and nodded.

Furtive eyes watched them from the windows of Allen Street as the two tall men rode toward the O.K. Corral. In front of the Crystal Palace saloon the sheriff rode out and held up his hand. The tall Texan stopped his horse and waited without speaking.

"You can't do this thing, Maverick," the sheriff shouted. "I got word to the guv'nor, an' you're to turn in your star as soon as the papers git here."

"You got the papers?" the deputy marshal asked quietly.

"They'll be here in uh hour," Boles shouted. "In th' name of th' Law I command you to turn back an' not go near th' O.K. Corral!"

"You better ride along so yuh kin call it self defense if Black Curly an' his pack is lucky," the Law Maverick snarled. "Now git out of my way before I gun yuh down an' ride over yore daid body."

He ripped the spurs into his horse and plunged forward to sweep the sheriff from his path. The stony-faced gambler gigged his horse and followed. Sheriff Boles controlled his mount and stared after the straight-backed pair; dismounted and tied his horse to the rack with fear contorting his beefy face.

At the O.K. Corral Black Curly and his gang were waiting. Their horses were tied to the poles of the pen, and Cole Ward and the gambler swung down from their saddles and anchored their horses with trailing reins. Shorty Devlin was standing a little to one side of his chief; eight other men were fanned out behind the pair with hands close to their holsters. The tall Texan walked slowly forward until only ten paces separated him from Black Curly. Doc Benson side-stepped to put several paces between himself and the deputy marshal. The outlaw watched the maneuvers with a sneer on his dark face, but his little black eyes were glittering with suppressed excitement.

"See you got here," he remarked casually. "Thought at fust you'd take your chance an' dog it down the back trail!"

"Yo're uh liar," the Texan contradicted quietly. "You knew I'd be here jest as shore as you are that the little gal up on Boot Hill was right about her dream. Only I wanted tuh tell yuh somethin' before I whittle yore notch on my right-hand gun."

"You won't have to whittle," the outlaw sneered, but now his face was puzzled with curiosity. "What was it you wanted to tell me—before I put out your lights?"

"The name is Ward," the deputy marshal said clearly, and his deep bass boomed across the yard. "Ole Jim Ward was my uncle, the man you an' yore rustlers bushed back there comin' through Skeleton Canyon. I taken up fer ole Jim, an' I've been savin' you fer my own gun, Curly!"

"It don't matter now," the outlaw leered. "There was one of them rannihans got away because I shot a mite high. So you've taken up fer ole Jim Ward?"

Without warning his hands slapped down to leather like striking snakes. The tall Texan was crouching forward with elbows bent out from his ribs, and none saw his hands swivel down to meet the leaping handles of his six-guns in an arc that spouted pale flame under the brassy sun. Black Curly jerked back before stumbling forward, and his fingers triggered a pair of slugs into the ground between his boots. Shorty Devlin went for his guns as the Texan

pivoted on his high heels, and the marshal's right-hand gun roared a message of death that the little outlaw never heard. Black Curly's legs were still twitching when Shorty Devlin fell across them with a hole through his heart.

Leaping from side to side like a jack rabbit, the deputy marshal turned his smoking guns on the outlaws that were just getting into action. A terrific roar announced the voice of old Betsy as Doc Benson pressed both triggers of his scattergun loaded with buck-shot. Three men melted to the ground as that awful charge took them high in the body, and the gambler was thumbing the triggers of his six-guns as he danced from side to side like an apple on a string.

Cole Ward threw his last bullet at a man who was taking deliberate aim at the gambler from the corner of the corral. The man lurched forward with arms outstretched as Doc Benson whirled and sent two shots into the last man left standing. He crouched forward with gray eyes merciless and cold as he watched the writhing figures to see that none of them got to a gun. Cole Ward was thumbing shells into his Colt; brought it up just as an outlaw raised up behind the body of Black Curly with six-gun thrust out before him. The gambler shot before the hammer could fall, and the outlaw was jerked back as the heavy slug made a black dot between his eyes. Cole Ward was smiling as he turned to Doc Benson.

"That's the job I was sent up here tuh do," he drawled. "Looks like th' politician didn't work fast enough tuh save his pards."

"He said them papers would be here in an hour," the gambler answered. "You're still th' law, Maverick."

"We'll git back to th' jail an' clear things up," the Texan answered. "Looks like Buryin' Joe is goin' tuh have uh busy day."

"Yeah," the gambler agreed, and once more his eyes were hard as glare ice. "An' Boot Hill plays no favorites!"

Stirrup to stirrup the two rode down the deserted street, glancing neither to right nor left until they reached the jail. They swung down at the tie-rack and entered the office where the gambler seated himself behind the desk and reached into a drawer for the tools that were kept handy in a box. He cleaned his guns one at a time, snugged them into the holsters, and filled his cartridge belt with fresh shells.

CHAPTER X

THE DEPUTY PULLS OUT

When he got up and walked to the door, the tall Texan sat down behind the desk and reached for his jack knife. He carved two neat notches before cleaning the balanced weapons, and Doc Benson smiled with the corners of his mouth.

"You squared up for ole Jim Ward while you was handlin' the law's business," he remarked. "If there are any outlaws left in Tombstone, they've hunted themselves a hole an' drug it in after them."

Cole Ward grunted. "Anything special you wantin' from the hotel?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing I can't do without," the gambler answered. "You reckon it's that bad, Maverick?"

"That hour is about up," the deputy marshal replied. "It's jest about time Sher'ff Boles was ridin' down here with uh army tuh back up his wawa. Better throw them saddle-bags on our hawsses so we won't have tuh bother none."

"About this Boles," the gambler said thoughtfully. "We both owe him a couple, Cole!"

"He's th' law here in Tombstone," the marshal answered quietly. "It would mean the owl hoot trail if we cut down on him now."

Doc Benson shrugged. "What of it?" he answered lightly.

"You couldn't fight near so good on the wrong side," the Texan told him positively. "An' it would give some of them sidewinders hidin' back in the hills uh chance tuh throw down on yuh for the price of yore scalp."

The tall gambler carried the saddlebags out and fastened them behind the saddles. He took a look up the street, and hurried into the office. Cole Ward was writing on a piece of paper, spelling the words laboriously.

"Time's up," the gambler whispered. "Posse comin' down the street. What you doin'?"

"Writin' out my resignation tuh ole Charley Dade what appointed me," the Texan answered. "Right now I'm uh Maverick agin."

He sealed the envelope and stuck it in his pocket as he walked to the door and joined the gambler. Four men trotted slowly down the street and stopped at the rack. Sheriff Boles and his deputy dismounted while the other two sat their horses with shotguns across their knees. Boles was scowling as he reached inside his vest and produced some papers. He cleared his throat importantly and began to read aloud.

"Cole Ward, sometimes called the Law Maverick, I hereby serve you with a paper from the guv'nor. You are no longer connected with th' law in any shape or manner."

"You ain't doin' any such thing," the Texan contradicted quietly. "Th' guv'nor of this state ain't got any authority over me or my office. I represent th' federal gov'ment in this district until I turns in my resignation tuh old Charley Dade what done appointed me. I don't know where you got that paper, an' I don't care what's in it, but I do know th' guv'nor knows better."

"I was afraid of that," Boles sighed. "So I done got a warrant for yore arrest for th' murder of one Black Curly. I'd advise you to surrender peacefully. Otherwise I'll have to use force to take you in. I'll guarantee safe keepin' an' a fair trial by yore peers!"

The Texan's bronzed face clouded with anger, and when he spoke his deep bass rumbled from his chest like sullen thunder.

"Now I'll tell you somethin'," he exploded. "Ever since I come tuh Tombstone yuh've done all you could tuh keep me from enforcin' the law. Ever' time I turned around I could hear yore rattles in th' grass, an' ever' time I arrested an outlaw you turned him loose. Yo're uh low-down sneakin' kiyoty what don't pack th' sand tuh back up yore bluffs, an' yore uh liar tuh boot. Now as one peace officer to another what cain't git along, I invite you tuh drag yore gun. Yo're uh side-windin', dry-gulchin' skunk!"

The sheriff stepped back a pace and glanced at his deputy. Joe Arnold stared straight ahead without expression on his face. The two men on horseback started to raise their shotguns; halted their movements when the flat voice of Doc Benson cracked across the dirt walk.

"Stand hitched! Ole Betsy is rarin' to speak another piece before I resigns as town marshal."

Cole Ward stepped forward and lifted the sheriff's guns as he glared into the beefy face. Boles had his hands up shoulder high, and he seemed relieved when his guns were no longer on his legs. The Texan stepped back and laid the six-guns on the door sill; moved forward again to face the scowling sheriff.

"I'm goin' tuh leave town right off," the deputy marshal said quietly. "I'm goin' tuh hand my resignation tuh ole Charley in person. But before I go I'm goin' tuh whale th' eternal hell out of yore fat political carcass fer all th' trouble yuh've give me when you took an oath tuh give me help. Git yore maulies up!"

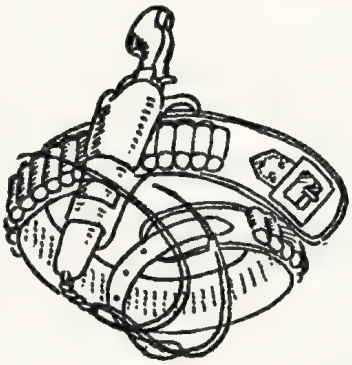
Boles stepped back a pace and appealed to his deputy. "Arrest that man, Joe! I hold a warrant on him fer murder!"

"Yo're th' sheriff," Arnold shrugged. "I'm starin' smack into the tunnels of that ole scatter-gun yonder, an' I've seen Doc Benson unlimber before. Sorry, Sher'ff, but I ain't wantin' no part of him!"

"I didn't know I had a coward fer a depity," the sheriff sneered.

"I've knowed right along I had one fer a boss," the deputy retorted angrily. "Yo're heavier than th' Maverick, an' he's done called your hand an' made uh bet of his own. I reckon it's up to you to either raise him or call."

The Texan's blue eyes were flaming again as he thought of the times the sheriff had tried to arrest him for murder when he had only done his sworn duty. He stepped forward suddenly and slapped Boles across the cheek with his left hand; stepped back and waited for the reaction he knew would take place. The sheriff roared as he lowered his head and rushed like a maddened bull that has been whipped out of the herd. The Texan side-stepped and brought his boot up quickly to land on the seat of the sheriff's creased pants as he hurtled blindly by.



Boles went to his knees and turned like a cat in spite of his weight. His right hand snaked down to his boot, drew a two-shot derringer as he wabbled to his feet. Cole Ward left the ground in a flying leap with arms outspread like a bull-dogger taking his ox; crashed on top of the roaring sheriff to knock the gun from his hand. Then he reached down and jerked Boles to his feet; held him with his left hand while the right slapped flat-handed to crack like pistol reports on the red face of the sheriff.

Boles twisted loose and kicked with all his weight behind his right leg. The blow caught the Texan in the groin; hurled him to the ground where he writhed in agony. The sheriff rushed in again with arms swinging, and the deputy marshal rolled clear and staggered to his feet. Boles hit him twice before he could get his arms up, and the Texan grinned with his split lips as he set himself and began to force his opponent back. His left fist jabbed out to close one of the little eyes, his right crossed neatly to the bulbous nose to start a flood of claret. Then he deliberately cut the sheriff up with his fists until the red face was bobbing like a chip in a stream; stepped in and ripped an uppercut from his knees to knock Boles sprawling in the dust.

"Don't hit me! I got enough!"

The deputy marshal stood over him with fists ready to renew the attack. Joe Arnold stepped up and laid his hand on the angry Texan's arm.

"Don't hit him, Maverick," the deputy pleaded quietly. "I'm askin' it, an' you know I never made it tough for you here in Tombstone!"

Cole Ward smiled for the first time as he stepped back and shook himself like a dog coming out of water. "Shore, depity," he answered promptly. "But you shore are workin' for uh skunk!"

"Not me," Arnold answered promptly.

He helped the sheriff to his feet, after which he unfastened his star and handed it to Boles. The sheriff blinked at the bright metal in his hand; wiped the blood from his face in a daze.

"I'm quittin'," the deputy said clearly. "Looks like yo're playin' her a lone hand, Boles. Them other two you swore in has done sloped."

"You git on yore hawss an' fog it," the deputy marshal said to the sheriff. "I've changed my mind about

leavin' till this outlaw business is all cleared up. You git under my feet an' I'll tromp yuh like I would uh snake!"

The sheriff mounted his horse without a word and rode up the street toward the Crystal Palace. Joe Arnold turned to his horse; turned back to the tall Texan hopefully.

"You stayin', Maverick?" he asked.

Cole Ward grinned. "Naw," he answered. "Me an' Doc is back-trackin' before sun-down."

"But you tole Boles—"

"I tole him he couldn't arrest me, an' I refuse tuh be run out of town," the Texan answered. "I'm all finished up here but there's uh good job for you if yuh work it right."

"What you mean?" the bewildered deputy asked.

Doc Benson lowered his shotgun and reached into his pocket. He tossed a shield to Arnold; grinned when he saw the deputy's face light up.

"Yo're the new town marshal till they appoint another one," Ward explained. "Nobody else has got the guts tuh hold down th' job, so it ought tuh be easy. Good luck to yuh, Joe."

Arnold fastened the star to his vest and mounted his horse as the other two vaulted into the saddles. Then he was riding up Allen Street stirrup to stirrup with them. The street seemed deserted until they passed the Grand Hotel, and Joe Arnold growled a warning.

"Don't know if we'll make it," he muttered hoarsely. "The sheriff has got himself another reception committee waitin'. He'll git you when yuh pass th' Crystal Palace shore as hell!"

The deputy marshal raised up in the oxbows and stared at the crowd lining the street on both sides.

"What yuh say, Doc?"

"What we waitin' for?" Doc said.

The Texan touched his horse with the spur, reined down to a slow walk with Arnold on one side and the gambler on the other. Right up to the Crystal Palace they rode and stopped squarely in front of the sheriff while the mob scowled. Doc Benson again had the sawed-off in his hands swiveling the tunnels toward the crowd on the left side. They knew that sawed-off. Knew it ran eighteen buck-shot to the barrel. Joe Arnold had both hands on his guns, and the sun sparkled on the town marshal's star pinned to his vest.

"You wantin' me, Sher'ff?"

The sheriff scowled at the Texan and retreated until his back was touching the men in front of the saloon. Cole Ward reached down as metal glistened in his hands, and when he straightened up in the saddle, the sheriff's guns were once more in the holsters where they belonged. Boles tried to meet the steady blue gaze above him and failed.

"I ain't lookin' for you," he faltered.

"Jest wanted to know," the deputy marshal answered. "Joe Arnold is the new town marshal here in Tombstone, an' he's a pard of mine. I hear of any politics bein' worked agin him, me an' Doc will ride back tuh see what for. *Adios,* Sher'ff!"

Blue eyes watching each face as they passed, the two tall men rode down Allen Street past the Bird Cage Opera House and the O.K. Corral. At the end of the street they paused while the Texan waved his hand to Joe Arnold. Three hundred men in the crowd behind the sheriff, but not one of them dared take a chance. A faint shout came to them as they turned horses away from Tombstone.

"So long, Maverick!"

Cole Ward smiled grimly. Somewhere out on the dim trails there were other tough towns to tame; towns as tough as Dodge City and Tombstone. Town marshal, sheriff, or United States deputy marshal, they would need the kind of law he carried in his holsters. The law of old Judge Colt. The Law Maverick was on the loose once more!

"You gents stay steady," said the man from behind the tree, "while I do a little rope cutting."

SIX-GUN RESURRECTION

By RALPH CONDON

Author of "Bait"

Out Of Hell's Mouth He Galloped To Swing The Devil's Lariat For The Killer Who Believed That Dead Men Tell No Tales.

The tall man shifted his legs a little to kick a burned end of wood into the fire and the quickening flame lighted the sardonic lines of his weathered face. The gleam of his unfathomable eyes shifted from one to another of the three who sprawled within the circle of light.

"Even poor tobacco mingles good with woodsmoke," he suggested, "and if it ain't askin' too much, I'd admire for one of you gents to stir me up a brown-shuck."

The oldest of the three laid down the riata in which he had been working a heavy noose, and carefully twisted a cigarette. When he had it burning, he went around the fire and put it between the man's lips.

"I'm obliged, Miller," the tall one said and pushed himself to a sitting

position with his bound arms. "I been feeling for that."

"Sure," the other grunted, "sure. I guess we can allow you that, all right." He went back to his rope beyond the fire.

For a time there was silence. Then an owl hooted mournfully from the thick of the cottonwoods and from far off in the night, a coyote raised his yammering bark.

The tall man drew deeply on his smoke and exhaled in a long, slow ribbon from his nose. "The coyote varmints is yelling daylight," he said, "and it's graying off in the east. You lads'll be fixing for your necktie party mighty soon now and I reckon there's no more use in me trying to talk you out of it."

"Yes," Miller agreed, "we'll be stringing you up in a little and you might as well save your breath. We were looking for a man about six foot two with black hair and eyes and dressed in a brown shirt and bat-wing chaps. There ain't enough men your size to make a mistake reasonable, so we'll just go ahead with our plans—but we'll give you some coffee while we're waiting for it to come day. Will you make some up, Joe?"

While the man Joe went about the coffee-making, the third man beyond the fire got up to stamp his feet against the chill. "You got a tight mouth," he said to the prisoner, "and you seem set to die with it closed, but you might anyway give us your name. We'll cut you down when we're through and bury you decent, lay your name on a slab with a runnin' iron."

The tall man laughed softly in his throat and rolled his smoke to the corner of his mouth. "You comfort me," he said, "and I thank you just the same—but I'm partic'lar where my name is laid with a running iron."

"Leave it be, Mort," Miller grunted, "you can hang a man under most any name; we'll call him Jones. That's who we thought this maverick was going to be, and even if he ain't, he looks enough like him to keep me satisfied."

The tall man was still for a moment, then he nodded. "Jones ain't so hell awful much of a name but it'll serve—partic'lar if we garnish it up with a front name that's got merit."

"All right," Joe said from his coffee-making, "you go ahead and pick out one that pleases you. We'll allow it."

The prisoner swung his hard eyes around toward the east and the faint streaks of day that were beginning to show through the cottonwoods. He spat the butt of his smoke into the fire and said dryly:

"From the conversation you gents have been having, I gather that you two are known as Mort and Joe and you with the rope are Miller—now all them names is well enough but they ain't dressy, so I guess I won't use any of those."

"For a miscreant that's got maybe a half hour to live, you're damn chosey," Joe growled, as he pulled the coffee off to cool, "but go ahead and name yourself a name."

"I take that kindly now," the tall one said, "I take it real kindly. The more I think of it, the better I like the Jones part—and for the first one, we'll make it Lee. Lee Jones is a name that a gent could be proud to travel under."

"Your travelin' days is done," Miller grunted, "but you can anyway use it to hang by."

"Now that's where you're wrong," the prisoner said, "that's where you're plumb wrong! You ain't going to hang nobody, mister. That's just an idea you got."

"You'd best be still," Miller advised. "It don't become a man to brag wild when he's goin' to die!"

"That's good advice," agreed the man they called Jones, "but it's like I say—you ain't going to hang nobody today."

"I'd worked up some respect for your nerve," Miller growled, "but

you've bragged that away. I don't reckon we'll bother to let you have no coffee!"

An owlish smile pulled at Lee Jones' face and for a moment, lighted by the youth that was hidden under the grim lines.

"Gents," he said frankly, "you had me worried some last night—I thought you might get to use your rope on me and if I was poor company, it was because of that."

"Say," Mort demanded harshly, "what you trying to do? Bluff somebody?"

"It's daylight enough to make out a man over the sights now," Lee Jones said. "It's plenty light to shoot now, and the next one of you hombres that so much as stirs a boot will get blown to thunder!"

"Oh for God's sake," Miller said disgustedly, "what you wasting your talk for when—"

"He is doing a heap of talking," a voice agreed from the cottonwoods, "but he's adhering strictly to the truth! You gents only got to move to start the shooting!"

There was a charged and deadly silence, broken at last by the tall man who laughed deep in his throat.

With a bellow of rage, Mort sprang across the fire, jerking his gun and counting on his line with Jones to hold back the shooting.

Jones swung himself onto his back and around. Like a striking snake he lashed out with all the power of his legs! The high-heeled boots caught the charging man in mid-air to hurl him back across the fire and crashing down among the steaming coffee cups. For a moment he lay still, then rolled groaning onto his face and was quiet.

Miller and Jones raised their hands above their heads without being told, and the man in the trees said:

"These jaspers craved to call you Jones—and I agree that Lee is a nice first name—so if you'll get to moving, Lee Jones, we'll look to the business in hand."

The tall man rocked himself to his feet and hopped around to where a rifle muzzle protruded over a boulder. He turned about then and felt a knife slice through the thongs that bound him. For a moment he rubbed his wrists to get the blood moving, then took the blade and cut his ankles free.

The man, Mort, was moving again, had risen to his hands and knees where he stayed for a moment swaying weakly.

"You gents stay steady while you're plucked," directed the grim old man who had come to rescue Lee Jones, "the next bad pass will be the last!"

Mort had gotten some of his breath back and he swore weakly but earnestly.

Lee went to take their guns and the old man said:

"Haze 'em out on the desert a way, son, they may get into trouble here."

"The trouble will come latter," Miller threatened. "I ain't just placed it yet, but I've heard your voice before!"

"If you ever crave to hear it again with that set of mortal ears, you'd better get moving," the old man grunted. "Get started now!"

Lee got his own gun from the pile of saddles, found his own Winchester in a stack by a tree and followed his three late captors out to the edge of the trees.

"You mavericks drift out about two three hundred yards onto the flat yonder and set down—and you stay facing the other way! If anyone of you turns around I'll see can I trim your ears off free-hand shooting."

Miller swore furiously.

Mort made hard going of it, holding his stomach miserably and Lee said regretfully:

"I'm sorry I kicked you plumb loose from your slats, but you would have it that way."

"We'll meet again," the man promised, "and I'll remember!"

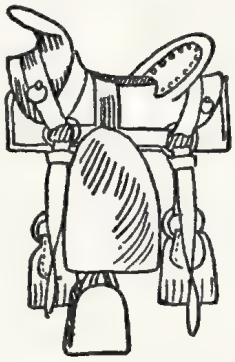
"Sure," Lee agreed and sat down

on a rock to roll a smoke and watch them go.

After a little the grizzled old man who had come to his aid came out of the cottonwoods to join him and in silence Lee passed over the makings.

When the three captives were two hundred and fifty yards away, Jones ordered them to stop, and then told his companion, "I figured you'd get here in time all right, Finn, but I ain't saying that I wasn't getting worried along before I heard you owl-hooting in the trees yonder."

Old Finnegan spat and stretched his wiry little body toward the first rays of the morning sun, "I seen the fire from back on the ridge," he said, "and I figured it was a heap bigger than you'd have had if you'd been alone, so I left my hound-dawg with the horse and come up afoot. What was the tarapins so set on hangin' you for?"



"Well," Clay explained, "as near as I can make it out, some jape about my size and shape, and riding another gray horse, robbed the stage and killed the driver over near the Malabeau Gap yesterday. They had posses watching the water holes and these lads didn't crave to prolong justice any, after the way I mussed 'em up when they were gathering me in."

"When you've hunted cats through this country as long as I have, you'll never go tearing into things without a look-see. I reckon you rared right in thinking it was me waiting for you?"

"I did," Lee Jones admitted, "and when I come around after the fracus, I was all trussed up and they were waiting for day to long-neck me!"

For a time there was silence. Finnegan rubbed a bony hand across the stubble of his weathered jaw, and trouble showed in the depths of his shrewd old eyes as he surveyed the big youth beside him.

Jones watched the three men on the flat for a time and then said grimly:

"I guess you better tell me, Finn. What's going on in this country?"

"Plenty," Finnegan growled. "To save time you better tell me what you know."

"I don't know a damn thing except rumors," Lee Jones said disgustedly. "All I know is that there are warrants out over five states for my brother Sam's arrest—that he disappeared the same night that eight thousand dollars was taken from the safe in the sheriff's office where he was deputy. Then—from what these mavericks yonder said, I gathered that my brother is getting credit for a lot of other things that have happened around here of late!"

"That's right," Finnegan agreed. "The blame for a heap of things has been laid at the feet of Sam Jones. It's your looking so much like him that nearly got you hanged—it was Sam's description that was sent out after the hold-up."

"Say, listen," Lee Jones said, "listen—are you—"

"Easy," the old lion hunter cautioned, "easy there, son. Don't fly off till you've got it all." For a moment he was still and when he went on, his voice was gentle, "Lee, I hate telling you this—but your brother Sam is dead. My dawg Sailears and me, we found him yesterday in the lavas over on Shaniko Flats. I'll spare you the details—but he's buried decent now."

For a long time, Lee was still, then when he spoke at last, the words seemed pulled up from the very bottom of him:

"I guessed that, Finn. I guessed that he must be dead—if he'd been alive I'd have heard from him."

In the still that followed his words, he rolled an unconscious smoke but dropped it down without lighting it.

"I don't have to tell you, Finn—I don't have to tell you that I'll get the

louse that fixed this if I have to blast the guts out of the whole damn White Horse Country to do it!"

"We'll get him, alright," Finnegan said bitterly, "but we'll have to watch ourselves, for this fellow is not only a killer, he's smart as a wolf! He's figured his play mighty close."

"Let's have a look at it," Lee said thinly. "Maybe he's slipped up some place."

"He's slipped all right," the old hunter agreed, "and I'll come to that in time, but first I'll give you the lay-out.

"Just three weeks ago, Larry Larsen, the government re-mount man, put eight thousand dollars of government money in Sheriff Ed Sims' vault for safekeeping. The next morning, both Sam and the money were gone. Aside from the sheriff, he was the only other man that knew the combination, so they took up the hunt for him. Then about a week later a store was robbed and the owner killed by a man answering Sam's description. Yesterday morning it was the stage—and the killer was riding a gray horse like your's and your brother's!"

"Is the horse the slip-up you were talking off?" Lee demanded. "He'd be a damn fool to keep Sam's horse."

"Before we come to slip-up," Finnegan objected, "let's put the whole thing together the way it had to have happened. Somebody who knew the money was there, either opened the safe or got Sam to do it. That cuts it down to a pretty narrow field. Sheriff Sims is the only other person that knew the combination and there ain't five men alive that could have gotten an excuse for Sam to open the box. It had to be somebody he trusted."

"You mean," Lee said and his voice carried the rasp of death, "that you think this yellow devil butchered him right there?"

Finnegan spread his thin old hands before him wearily. "That's the way of it, son. Sam was killed from behind with a sandbag and he was killed the whole three weeks ago. Then the murderer re-locked the safe and, with the rain to cover his tracks, rode with the body out onto Shaniko Flats! Since then he's pulled a couple more jobs and is laughing like hell to see people hunting like wolves for a man that ain't even alive!"

After a moment of silence, Lee nodded, "I get it," he said, "I get it now—the slip-up is that he never figured anybody would find the body. He never figured anyone else would find out that Sam was dead!"

"And," said Finnegan, "if we lay low, sooner or later, somebody is going to claim he seen Sam alive—and that man's going to be the man we want!"

"No," Lee said softly, more to himself than to his companion, "we can't just lay low. We ain't got time to play a waiting game. These three would-be hangers yonder likely didn't know Sam much, if at all, but I fitted his description close enough for them. As soon as word gets around about that, the killer is going to get plenty jumpy and maybe get clear away without our even knowing he's gone. I think we better strike and strike damn quick!"

"Let's see your idea," Finnegan said doubtfully, "you know we can't go ripping around the country very long without tying into a whole flock of shooting scrapes."

"Wait a minute. You said a while ago that the field of suspects had to be pretty narrow—that it had to be somebody that was mighty close to Sam. Who?"

"All right," Finnegan said, "we'll go over 'em. In the first place, there's the sheriff, Ed Sims. He could have got the money out any old time and done the other part when it was handy. I ain't ready to suspect Ed, but there's so few of 'em that I've got to mention him.

"Then there's Larry Larsen, the government re-mount man that put

the money in the safe. He's been coming here for years and Sam knew him mighty well.

"Then there's Lew Thorn. He was part time deputy under Sam. He's chief deputy now—he could have got Sam to open up all right and he also got a better job with him gone. I always thought he was a pretty nice kind of a kid though.

"Then there's Lund and Carson, the two stock association special deputies. They hang around the office a lot and leave money there once in a while. Sam would have opened up for either of them. I guess that's all of 'em."

Lee got up impatiently from his seat on the rock. "Where could I find that bunch all together?"

"I don't know about all together," Finnegan said, "but after the hell that's been stirred up, you ought to find any or all of 'em around Ed Sims' office. They'll be talking over loose ends today. But if you drift in there, there'll hell-for-sure be a killing!"

"I ain't going," Lee Jones said coldly, "it's a visit from *Sam* Jones, that them jaspers is going to have!"

Finnegan wheeled sharply around and for a long moment his hard eyes surveyed the big cowboy before him. Then the doubt faded slowly from his face and he nodded, "Yes, you're a hell of a lot like him. A hell of a lot, and with your three-four days' stubble and dried blood across your face from the roughing you got, you might make it. You might make it but for one thing, your brother packed a three-inch scar across his right jaw."

"I got a razor," Lee snapped. "You cut a streak of whiskers away across there and it'll get by for a scar as long as we need one."

"Damn me!" Finnegan said grimly, "it sounds like a crack-pot scheme but I'll play it out with you! Let's get on the move! We'll take the horses away from these three and they won't get into town until we've had time to make our bid!"

While the old lion hunter went to get his horse and dog from beyond the ridge, Lee saddled his own mount and, loosing the other three, started them away homeward with a cut of his quirt.

Ten minutes later, with the three stranded men and the cottonwood clump left behind, the two riders crossed the rimrock and started across the ten mile stretch of Crowder Flats on the Steptoe trail.

In an hour and a half they were close in to town and Finnegan took the lead.

He left the trail to follow up a dry wash for a quarter of a mile, then cut sharply across a low ridge and dropped down through a littered wagon yard to an abandoned, ramshackle barn.

"We'll leave the horses and the hound here," the old hunter told Lee, "there won't anybody spot 'em, and if we have to ride in a hurry, we'll anyway have some kind of a chance."

"If we ride in a hurry, it'll be after somebody and not from 'em," Lee Jones said shortly and got his razor from the saddlebag. "Here's my blade—I reckon you can work some sort of scar on me without a lather."

"It'll likely turn out to be a scar," Finnegan grunted as he went to work, "you got bristles that would put a wild hawg to shame!"

A few moments later though, he had worked away a strip of beard that was to his liking and Lee put his razor back in his kit.

"From the feel, I guess you marked me all right, Finn. Now where is this sheriff's office?"

"Keep your shirt on," Finnegan advised. "That square 'dobe that you see the back of yonder is it. We ain't got far to go to find trouble now."

"Have they got a back door to the place?"

"They don't put back doors on their jails and sheriff's offices in this country," the hunter said owlishly, "it just makes one more hole to watch in case of trouble and there's always trouble!"

The two moved along in silence then until they came to the alley that ran by the side of the jail into the main street of the little cow town.

"All right, Finn," Lee said softly, "so far so good—we'll split here."

"What the hell do you mean—split? I'm in this thing until she quits bucking!"

"Listen," Lee Jones' voice was as hard as his eyes, "there's only one thing that counts in this thing—getting the polecat that got Sam! We've got to make sure of it, and to make sure of it, we've got to keep a card in the hole!"

"All right," Finnegan growled, "I supposed I'd be the goat. What's the play?"

"There's only the one door to this place?"

"Yep."

"Then that's the play!"

Old Finnegan ran his hand caressingly over the breech of his rifle. "That front door is a one-way passage—the loft of the feed store across the way ought to have a most commandin' view!"

"I'll see you at breakfast," Lee said and started away down the alley.

"We'll likely meet to eat it in hell," the old man growled in farewell, and slouched away toward his chosen post.

Lee Jones swung into the main street of Steptoe at a normal pace. His wary eyes swept appraisingly up and down its length.

Two men were going into a restaurant half a block away.

A freight wagon was pulled up before the stage depot.

Lee located the feed store almost directly across the street as he went up the three steps to the door of the sheriff's office and jail. He pulled open the screen door, went in across the little hallway and to the room beyond.

The shades were pulled half down against the coming heat of the day, and in the cool gloom Lee Jones saw a man bent over a mass of papers at a desk. For a moment he stood tensely still, then the man at the desk said:

"Just a minute, Lew."

Lee Jones went forward across the room, keeping his gait normal, unhurried.

"I'll tell you—" the man at the desk started and looked up.

The ticking of the old eight day clock on the wall filled the silence for five seconds, each tick sounding crashingly loud and far spaced. Then the man at the desk said:

"Sam, for God sakes!"

He got up then and Lee could see the sheriff's gold star pinned to the front of his shirt. He was a big, heavy-boned man standing a full six feet, with a slight stoop to his shoulders that did not hide the strength of power that was there.

"You stay right there for a little, sheriff," Lee said softly without reaching toward his gun.

Ed Sims made a little gesture with his hands while he was waiting for the words to come.

"Sam—you been busted up some. You been held, maybe?"

"No," Lee said, "I ain't been held."

Sims was still for a moment thinking, then he said:

"I had been hoping that you'd show up, but now that you have it kind blows me up for a little. I guess you better tell me your story while I steady down."

"I ain't ready to tell no stories."

"Listen," Sims said, "you've got to tell me about things! Man—you're posted all over the country—wanted by the federals!"

"Well, here I am."

"You mean you come in to give yourself up? That you're admitting you done these things?" The sheriff's voice was incredulous.

"No," Lee Jones' voice was flat, "I didn't come in to give myself up."

Ed Sims' eyes went hard as they moved down the length of the big youth before him, his voice was very grim when he said:

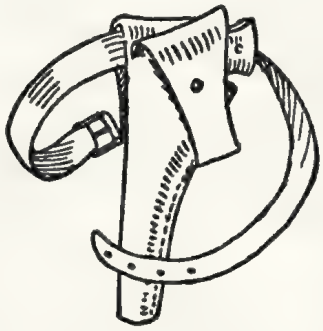
"So you come in to shoot it out with me, Sam! Looking back over five years together, I don't see no reason why, but if you've done these other things, your mind must be cracked and that'll explain it."

Lee stood with his hands resting on the back of a wooden chair and a half smile pulled at his lips. "All right, sheriff, I guess you'll pass—"

"Maybe you're faster and maybe you ain't," Sims cut in. Then, before Lee could speak again, his hand licked downward to his gun.

Lee Jones flung himself forward and to one side as he hurled the chair.

The lower rungs caught Sims' gun arm just above the wrist and smashed the weapon from his hand. Without an effort to retrieve it, he charged, cutting loose a terrific right hand smash at the big cowboy's head.



Lee went under the blow, smashed a left to the pit of the stomach and a right to the jaw that set the sheriff down in a heap.

In the moment that the lawman sat dazed, Jones went across the room and gathered up the fallen gun, then stood waiting while the man got up and went slowly to sit down behind his desk again.

After a while, Sims said thoughtfully, "I get it now—I should have got it sooner. You ain't Sam Jones—you're the brother he was always talking about from down in the Table Mountain country. I knew there was something wrong, but I didn't see for sure until you knocked me down with your left hand! Sam would have been a sucker for that punch of mine—he always led with his right!"

"All right," Lee agreed, "I guess we understand each other now. I'm sorry I slammed you so hard."

"I've been slammed before," the sheriff told him, "and I guess once more won't make any difference—partic'lar if you can help us clean up this mess. And I reckon you must have something or you wouldn't be here."

Lee shoved the gun back into Sims' holster as he went around the desk to pick up the chair and sit down. "I guess you can see that I ain't here for but one reason?"

"I don't know what I think," the sheriff offered slowly, "I never did think deep down that Sam was into this the way it looked, but whatever I think, I've got to know where he is!"

Lee Jones met the lawman's troubled eyes levelly for a moment and he knew the same deep ache he had known when Finnegan had told him the truth, when he said:

"All right, sheriff, I guess I better tell you. Sam is dead! Dead out on Shaniko Flats."

Ed Sims sat for a long time without speaking, his big hands working open and shut on the desk before him.

"I see," he mused, "I see what you're getting at. You think he was killed the night of the robbery to cover the trail of the guilty one. That's something new to work on and you'll have to prove it about Sam, of course. But for now, I'll take your word for it while we try to put things together."

"I can prove that Sam is dead all right," Lee said flatly. "I can prove it if I have to—"

Sims rose and stood for a time with his closed fists resting on the desk.

"But you don't think you'll have to prove it—you think we can get the killer right here in the office!" There was a ring of excitement in his voice.

"I think that if we sit tight," Lee agreed, "and don't let anybody out that's once been in here, it won't be long before the right one comes in and blows himself clear out of the water!"

Sims smashed his fist on the desk. "By God, yes! We'll do it. The killer

is the only other man that knows Sam is dead!"

"It's our best chance," Lee agreed, "and if that don't work, we'll have plenty of time to work out something else and prove that Sam *is* dead."

Ed Sims rubbed his hand across the rising lump on his jaw and his eyes moved around the room.

"I hate even to think who may be the man," he said gravely, "but we've got to be honest and suspect 'em all. They'll start coming in any time now after breakfast—you get over near the wall yonder where they won't see you until they get full into the room. I'll set here at my desk where the light will be on them. We'd better get ready!"

"I guess the stage is about set for the blow-off," Lee Jones said, and his voice was strained a little.

He took up his chair and went across the room to the darkest side near door opening into the jail. With his back still toward the desk, he stopped dead still when Ed Sims said:

"The stage is set all right, you damn fool, and after I've shot the meat away from over that fake scar of yours, you'll just be the corpse of Sam Jones, murderer, that I had to shoot down in line of duty!"

Lee put the chair down slowly and swung around. There was a smile on his face, but it was utterly without mirth, and in his eyes burned a light as cold as death itself.

"You almost fooled me, Sheriff," he said softly.

"But not quite! You'd kind of drilled yourself against a brother showing up—you handled that nice—but you didn't count on that brother finding Sam! That's what wrecked your game."

"Wrecked, hell," the sheriff derided, "you're just a dead damn fool!"

"No, Sheriff, I ain't dead—I took the loads out of that gun before I gave it back."

The color drained instantly from the man's face and the long line of his teeth showed like a trapped animal as his finger jerked down on the trigger. Three times he snapped the hammer, then with a strangled cry he hurled the useless gun wildly at Lee Jones' head.

"You can't even throw straight," Lee said coldly, "you ain't got the nerves of a jack rabbit. Now you stay right where you are and keep your hands away from the desk or I'll gut-shoot you!"

Without haste, Lee went to lock both the doors and then over to the desk and went through the drawers. He found one extra gun there. With it and two rifles that had been hanging on wall pegs, he crossed over to the narrow, barred window that opened into the street. One after another he pitched the weapons out, then collected the sheriff's empty Colt from the floor and pitched that and his own out.

Through it all, Sims watched him like a cornered beast. "What you doing?" he demanded hoarsely. "What in God's name you doing?"

"Getting ready."

The look in Lee Jones' eyes left no single doubt as to the meaning of his two terse words. Without a single other word, Ed Sims charged!

This time, he brought the battle with him but he made no wild right handed swings. Instead, he rushed with his powerful arms driving out from close to his body, fighting to get in close where he might come to grips.

But Lee Jones met him square with a blasting left and right that set him back on his heels, and started the blood running from his mouth.

With the savage haste of desperation, the lawman charged again and again. One of his body blows caught the younger man over the heart and straightened him, shook his bones to the marrow. Before he could move his guard fully into place for his new position, a crashing right caught him across the side of the jaw.

Lee covered then, gave ground before the other man. For the first time, there filtered through his cold fury a realization that he must use his head, his heart and his power if he were to survive against his enemy.

The heart blow and the smash to the jaw had slowed his action a little but he met the next rush with a one-two punch, then gave ground again. His head started to clear then and he set himself to an even pace, slipping away before two more rushes but countering before he went. In a long grind of battle, his youth and condition must surely beat the other man down. Sims divined this intention, for when he rushed again, he ducked and dived with his arms wide-spread to lock his arms around the younger man's body.

The impact started Lee backward and the driving power of Ed Sims' legs kept him going until he crashed into the angled walls of a corner.

From that point, there was no slipping free, and Sims loosed his hold and dropped back a pace to slug it out. His blasting body blows seemed to drive clear through to the spine. For a moment, Lee was numbed into helplessness. Then the sheer agony of it snapped him to and he got his own powerful arms into action.

For two whole moments no single foot was moved and the mauling slug of bone on flesh drowned the labored whistle of breath! Then Lee Jones knew a thrill of savage elation as the man before him began to give ground.

"Damn you, no!" he roared, with mighty arms he seized the man and hurled him around into his place in the corner. Again he started the driving power of his fists. Drove them until the man under them wilted and slumped to the floor.

Through battered lips, Ed Sims groaned, "I've had enough—I'll do anything—tell you everything! The money—it's in the oak chest at my house—Sam's hat and shirt! Everything! I'll—"

"Get up and save your breath for fighting!" Lee said without pity. With his bleeding hands he jerked the man up and flung him standing into the corner. Again he lashed out, driving his fists in and upward with a mechanical, killing rhythm.

For a little, Sims struck back, then as there was no lessening of the attack, his blows grew weakly desperate, and Lee Jones was barely aware that they had stopped when the man slumped down again to the floor.

"Get up!" he said thickly. "Get up!" Then when the man made no move or sound, he turned him over and stood for a long moment looking down.

After a while, the meaning of the open, staring eyes got through to his weary brain and he turned away and went across to the door. He fumbled a little with the lock before he got it open.

A great mob of silent men were there, jammed into the hallway and overflowing into the street. For an instant there was no single sound, then a little rippling sigh passed over the mass and they were still again.

In a little open space, clear of the others, was Old Finnegan, gun in hand.

"I seen you throw the guns out," he said dryly, "and next to seeing a good fight, comes hearing one!" He jerked his head toward the mass of eager faces. "I stood these jaspers back from the door until they got a chance to hear him howl—so I guess there ain't a thing to do, son, but to mop you up some and gather in the breakfast you was talking about a little while ago."

A short roaring cheer swept over the men as they started to make way and the old lion hunter said owlishly:

"Oh, yes—I forgot. Gents, this here is a young friend of mine from over Table Mountain way—you can call him Jones."

"I christen thee 'Lord Buckingham!'" orates the Quince.

BALLOTING BILLY-GOAT

By S. OMAR BARKER **Author of "89¢ Sheriff"**

"Here's how, health an' hip-hooray," offers Bullhide Toomey, "to the Honorable Quince of Ales, next sheriff of Tecolote County! And," he goes on, turning to the Widow Winsor, "to the charming lady who will be his chief deputy—the first lady chief deputy, I may say, in the noble history of the sovrin state of New Mexico!"

He flourishes his glass of the Quince's Internal Wart Remover like a *cocinero* flaggin' down a horse fly.

"Haw! But I say, y'know!" protests the Quince, né Mister Charles Wellington Winterbotton, big auger an' owner of the Flyin' Bottle Ranch. "Jolly, what? But perchawnce I shan't be elected—votes, y'know, an' all that rot! Perhawps my opponent, Mister Jenobee—"

"Not even Ab Jenobee," busts in Mister Toomey, "can ketch fish without bait. An' where, these times, is he goin' to raise it?"

That's a question all right, Jenobee bein' an ol' he curly wolf of a cowman, an' not much of a politico like the candidates them Republicans gen'rally nominates in this county, a heap of his backin' will have to come from cow folks. It takes a lot of dollar bills to win an election in Tecolote County, an' with the cow market down

The Quince Of Ales, Demo Candidate For Sheriff, Trails A Jolly Old Bandit And Leaves His Blooming Billy-Goat To Chew Over The Votes.

to where critters ain't hardly worth the powder to shoot 'em, where is Ab Jenobee's campaign funds comin' from? But there ain't no question about who ol' Bullhide aims to milk for the *melonque* needed to finance the vote-buyin' for the Democrat ticket. In fact us boys has all got a hunch that's how come 'em to think of runnin' the Quince fer sheriff in the first place. Because everwhen the Quince sends a slip of paper to the bank with his John Henry on it, they start right off unlacin' the money sacks. *I* know, even if the Quince don't, that it's this matter of campaign financin' that Bullhide Toomey is leadin' up to.

Now us warty waddies that works for the Flyin' Bottle brand has yipped an' throwed our hats over the fence plenty when the Democrat convention shoved our monocle-wearin' boss into the chute as a candidate, but our tongues shore ain't hangin' out with anxiety to git him elected. First place, he'd have to move in to the county seat to live, an' we've got too happy an' hiccuppy home life here at the Rawnch to take any joy in that. Second place, I'd been up the trail with Ab Jenobee, an' he's jest the kind of a horny-handed, hard-shootin', law-lovin' ol' rannyhan that this county needs for sheriff, infestered with petty rustlin' like it is. Third place, what's this about the Quince havin' to appoint a female chief depitty if he's elected?

But it looks like they've got the Quince on the bronc, now, an' he's got to ride. It's easier to git boosted onto a bucker sometimes than it is to make a graceful climb-off.

"It's understood, of course," goes on Bullhide, smooth as a horse's tongue, "that Missus Winsor, havin' withdrawed her candidacy in your favor, will become chief depitty upon your election?"

That question, with the lady herownself present, is kinder takin' advantage of the Quince's being a gentleman.

Myself, I ain't under no sech handicap.

"Excuse my warty nose," I busts in, "but this country's kinder used to men wearin' the pants."

The Widow Winsor gives me a look that would wither a ramrod.

"Fie, Watson!" says the Quince, bowin' to the lady. "I rawther fawncy, madam, that you will be chawmin' in, er—y'know—what I mean to say—what-y'ma-call-its!"

"He means britches," I offer. "But—"

"Check!" grins ol' Bullhide. "An' now that's settled, Mister Winterbottom, we come to the matter of your—er—financial contribution to the campaign. Would you consider five hundred, say $300 of it in one dollar bills for use on election day, excessive?"

"Excessive, hell!" I snorts. "It's highway robbery, Bullhide! Why—"

"Watson!" says the Quince. "Restrain yourself, y'know!"

But he's got the look on his rosy face of a man that's got a bear by the tail.

"Haw!" he says, an' pours hisself another drink. It fortifies him some. "The jolly ol' mazuma," he says, "you shall have it, Mister Bullskin. But in acceptin' the bloomin' nomination—we were rawther impetuous, eh, Watson? Y'know—this an' that an' so forth! Now I should be bloody well chawmed to withdraw, y'know, in favor of Mrs. Winsor—permit her the honor of becomin' the first lady sheriff in New Mexico an' all that jolly rot, what!"

"Oh, Mister Wintrybottom!" simpers the Widow.

But ol' Bullhide says it cain't be did. He knows, I reckon, that the Quince is mighty apt to be elected, along with the votes them five hunderd bucks will wrangle, whilst to put a woman over he'd have to buy the whole county.

"Nossir, Quince," he says, "your number's drawed to run this race *an'*

win it. You wouldn't let us down, would you? An' have you got your check book handy?"

He wouldn't. An' he has—for two hunderd smackers, an' no tellin' how much of that will git lodged in one of ol' Bullhide's one-way pockits.

"Quince," I says, when they've vamoosed, "you've shore got pushed off into the quicksand, an' if—"

"Watson," he busts in. "Do not, y'know, be a bally awss! An' would it be awskin' too much of you, as a knight of saddle an' stirrup, to tinkle along over to Las Cuevas an' fetch home a bit of livestock of the genus *capricornus poco-loco* presented to me lawst evenin' by a most worthy Spanish gentleman by the name of José Ignacio What y'ma-call-it?"

"It would," I snaps, "but I'll do it. How big a bottle will I need to bring it in?"

Well, it turns out to be jest an' ol' crazy he-billy goat with whiskers broomin' the ground, an' fixed idees aginst leadin' on a rope. It don't soothe me none, neither, on the way home, when ol' Ab Jenobee comes pirootin' along on his single-footin' sorrel. But at least he calls me by my right name instid of "Watson."

"Howdy, Hoss-Tail," he grins. "What's that a-holt of your rope?"

"Jest another candidate fer sheriff!" I snaps back.

"Where you goin' with him?"

"I ain't goin' with him. He's goin' with me."

"Is that a fack?" says Ab, spatterin' a spot on this billy's sway-back with tobacco juice. "I didn't notice. Damn if it ain't kinder hard to tell about you Democrats, whichaway you're headin'."

"Yeah?" I pants. "If it's any news to you, us Democrats is goin' to elect a sheriff, come Tuesday."

"So I've been hearin'," says Ab, "till I kinder believe it. An' a female chief depitty, if I ain't misinformed. Well, that'll be nice. Some of the boys in jail been complainin' lately about not havin' nobody to smooth their pillers for 'em. But speakin' serious, Hoss-Tail, your boss is a mighty right hombre, lots of ways, only with the county plumb rotten with sneak-rustlin' like it is, chief depitty ain't no job fer a woman. Ain't you got no influence with the Quince?"

"Sure," I grunts. "Ain't he lettin' me play tag with this sweet little *capricornus* this mornin' instid of sweatin' over a brandin' fire?"

"Three cheers!" grins Ab. "How much *melonque* they hook him for?"

"Nary a cent," I lies. "Either the Quince gits in on his merits, or he don't git in, you savvy!"

"Sure," he grins. "Fact, I'm kinder aimin' to vote for him myself. A man enjoys to be on the winnin' side, somehow."

"I don't," I grunts, "an' I'll tell you why."

So, ol' Ab an' me havin' nursed outa the same bean pot, you might say, in times past, I bust down an' tell him what's bringin' out gray hair on my bald spot.

"I see," he says, plumb sober. "Your roll's in his wagon, so though you ain't for him, you cain't be aginst him. Right enough. Well, I see your feller-Democrat there, with the whiskers, is a-frettin' to travel, so I won't be keepin' you. Drop over an' spit on my floor sometime. So long, Hoss-Tail."

I git back to the ranch about noon. Yeah, the goat is still with me. I bust right in.

"Excuse my warty nose," I says, but I've got that piece of hell in a goat hide out here."

"Pippo!" cries the Quince. "Fetch him in! We'll jolly well christen the blattin' blighter, eh!"

"If you mean name him," I says, "I been doin' that all the way home."

But the Quince has got to do it up in style. He calls in the boys, puts on one of them posthole hats an'

cracks a bottle acrost this billy-goat's nose.

"I christen thee 'Lord Buckingham'!" he orates. Only he pernounces it "Buckinum."

"Buttin' 'em," suggests Gramp Simes, "might be more approperate."

But the loop don't land—not with the Quince.

"Whoosh!" proclaims Lord Buckinum, through his nose, an' starts to git warlike. Then the dribblin's of that likker runs down onto his lips, he laps out at it, gits him a taste of that Internal Wart Remover, an' he's a changed goat right now.

"Ba-a!" he says, plainly meanin': "If it all tastes like that, hit me again!" An' the Quince obliges.

"Watson," he says finally, "kindly conduct Lord Buckinum out and inform him of the location of the turnip patch!"

I hustle him out all right, but I don't need to show him nothin'. By evenin' he's found it all out for hisself, includin' a battle with the Quince's pet buck deer, eatin' a suit of Gramp Simes' red underwear off the line, an' whuppin' several gooseberry bushes to a finish. Then he discovers them empties the Quince is always heavin' outa the window, an' from then on he keeps busy suckin' at them.

Down in the bunkhouse us waddies holds us a pow-wow, tryin' to fret out some way to pervent the Quince from gittin' elected Sheriff without openly opposin' him an' hurtin' his feelin's. For it's plain as the bristles on a skeered hawg, that Bullhide Toomey has convinced him he's honor-bound to go ahead with it an' carry the rest of the Democrat ticket to victory along with him.

"We might threaten him to draw our time," suggests Ed Patterson. "Tell him we jest cain't work at ease within that close reach of a sheriff."

"Me, I never grab the irons till the calf's ketched," opines ol' Jonk. "He ain't elected yit. Maybe he won't be."

"He will," I says, "if them Mex precincts votes for him. An' they will—if I know my dollar bills."

So we work out a little plan. We fix up a speech for the Quince to make the next night at Las Cuevas. Spanish, it is, supposin' to be tellin' the Mexes how warm he loves 'em. But ackshully callin' 'em lousy sheepherders. They're techy, these Mexes, an' we figger that'll make 'em vote three, four times apiece aginst him.

But the Quince, not savvyin' them words, he cain't memorize 'em without the paper, an' when he gits up to make his oration, the paper is gone. It ain't hard to figger where. The Quince an' Lord Buckinum has got to be plumb pals mighty quick. He drags this goat to the meetin' as his mascot, an' Lord Buckinum snitches the speech out of his back pockit an' eats it. That leaves the Quince's Spanish plumb afoot. So he "pippos" around a little in English, for, y'know, law an' what-y'ma-call-it—order.

It makes a hit.

"Viva el Queence!" yells the *paisanos.* Or maybe it's because Bullhide has done slipped loose the word that there'll be cash in the corral on election day, come Tuesday.

On Saturday ol' Ab Jenobee comes ridin' by.

"Goin' to invite me to the weddin'?" he asks.

"Maybe you mean the funeral," I says. "Your political funeral comes Tuesday. Excuse my wilted ears, but did you say weddin'?"

"Well," he grins, "the Widow Winsor ain't usin' them exact words, but she's been tellin' the little birds how nice it'll be for Sheriff Wintrybottom to keep the chief-depittyship right in the family, an' you know these widows."

I do. It ain't been as long as it seems since one of 'em married me. An' the idee of the Widow Winsor gettin' that loop on our noble Quince ain't so pippo. But I give Jenobee the high an' horsey razzberry, anyhow.

"You better git rid of them ticks, Mister Jenobee," I says. "They're suckin' into your judgment."

"*Bueno-hay,* Hoss-Tail," he grins. "I jest thought you'd like to know. Maybe the Quince would, too. The Honorable Widow is claimin' she'll swing her precinct 90% to the Quince in this here election, an' in the face of that, how will he refuse?"

Knowin' the Quince's *noblish oblige* idees about honor an' so on, I kinder wonder about that myownself. It looks more than ever like us boys, in boostin' the Quince into nomination fer sheriff, has pushed him off in a bog, an' the Widow Winsor aims to tamp him down. But him, he's in there this minute, plumb unconsarned, pourin' likker into this pet goat of his an' tryin' to learn him tricks.

"Well, if you ain't goin' to invite me to the *casorio,*" says ol' Ab, "I'll be curlin' along. Don't go brandin' no calves with a cold iron, Hoss-Tail." An' off he rides.

So there I am, betwixt hell an' high-water. Ol' Ab Jenobee talks light, but he can shoot heavy, straight an' hard when required. He'd make the best sheriff Tecolote County ever had. An' the Quince of Ales, on the other hand: he's an A-1 boss, a double A-1 gentleman an' judge of good likker, but he jest ain't got no idee what a mess he's about to step into by gittin' elected sheriff, with a female politico promised the chief depittyship.

I go in, aimin' to tell him what ol' Ab has jest rumored. But I lose my nerve.

"What ho, Watson!" he greets me, lookin' up from braidin' Lord Buckinum's whiskers. "Wherefore so lugubrious, an' all that rot? Is it this election matter that so harasses your handsome features?"

"Mm," I says. "I reckon I ain't got no dog in the fight, Quince."

"Dog?" he eyebrows me. "I say, is there a dogfight, too?"

Sunday night the Widow Winsor stages a big *junta* in her precinct to ballyhoo the Quince for sheriff. So of course we've all got to put on our low necked clothes an' join the herd. Not only that, but the Quince is bound to drag Lord Buckinum along as his mascot, an' I draw the job of goat-tendin'. Lord Buckinum, I grieve to state, is somewhat in his cups, so I depittize Larry an' Jonk an' ol' Gramp Simes to help me hold him off back of the stage durin' the meetin'.

Now I ain't prepared to state how come him to git loose jest as the Widow Winsor rises in all her glory, in a green dress tied with great big bows behind, to open the meetin'. Them things jest happens, you might say, on the spur of the moment. An' of course us boys ain't goin' to ruin our repitations as cowhands by wranglin' no goat in public, so we don't run out there on the stage to fetch him back. All we do, we set back an' hope fer the best.

Naturally you couldn't expect a pore simple billy-goat with a quart of Internal Wart Treatment in him to see things jest as they are. Smarter folks than Lord Buckinum might easy have mistook them big ol' bows on the back of Widow Winsor's dress fer turnip leaves, wavin' in the breeze, specially as he was headed straight towards 'em when he slipped outa our hands.

"Boys," I whispers, as Lord Buckinum eyes them ribbons with a lean an' hungry look, "it comes to my mind that Missus Winsor prob'ly ain't goin' to approve of this."

"That's right," says ol' Jonk, "an' like as not, knowin' who this here he-nanny belongs to, it's right possi-

ble that she may even git kinder mad about it."

"An' possibly," says Larry, "lay the blame on that sterling candidate fer sheriff knowed as Mister Charles Wellington-Winterbootom, Quince of Ales."

"It'd shore be too bad," mourns Gramp Simes, holdin' his nose to keep from snickerin', "if she'd kinder withdraw her support on account of it."

Well, we needn't to of worried. You jest cain't tell about widows with ambitions to become depitty sheriffs. Lord Buckinum takes a pull at them ribbons, does a jig-step acrost the stage, stands up on his hind legs an' raises hell gen'rally before the Quince can git aholt an' stop him. But the Widow Winsor, she jest smirks an' smiles.

"Friends an' feller citizens!" she orates. "As you can plainly see, them Republicans have not yet got our goat! I take great pleasure in interducin' to you, *amigos mios,* our candidate for sheriff, Mister Charles W. Wintrybottom, Quince of Ales!" An' the crowd eats it up.

"It seems," observes ol' Jonk, as us four cowboys sneaks out the back way, "that widows does not have the feeling about goats that you might expect. Any of you boys know of a good badger hole we can crawl into?"

Comes the day before election, an' Ol' Bullhide Toomey comes callin' on the Quince agin. He don't say it in so many words, but he makes it purty clear that the election is goin' to be kinder close, an' that he's countin' heavy on the vote pullin' power of them 300 one-buck bills the Quince has promised him, to land the Democrat ticket acrost the river high, dry an' handsome. Without it, they'll still be sunk, he claims.

"Oh, quite," smiles the Quince. "If one accepts nominations, one must jolly well do his bit for the dear ol' party, what! I shall dispatch messengers to Copper City for the money, at once! But one never knows — no end of robbers an' jolly ol' bandits about at night, what! Much safer for you to call for my—er—modest contribution here in the morning, if you follow me."

Ol' Bullhide ain't none too strong for the delay, but you don't holler boo at a cow you're slippin' up on to milk, so he says O.K., then, in the morning.

"Quite," says the Quince "Bright an' early, what? An'—awskin' your pardon, Mister Toomey, I should be grieved no end if it should be within your, y'know, contemplation to utilize these jolly ol' funds for the direct purchase of free American suffrage in my behalf, what?"

"Why certainly, not, Quince," says Bullhide, kinder dazed by all them jaw-breakin' words. "We jest aim to buy a few votes with 'em, that's all."

That afternoon the Quince sends me an' Larry Pinell to the bank for the money. It's about two P.M. when we draw it, an' lucky we do, because as we find out later, about a quarter to three a lone bandit sticks up the bank an' makes his getaway with jest about all the one-buck paper the bank has laid in for the election rush.

Now $300 in ones is quite a sackful. Me an' Larry delivers it to the Quince safe an' sound, however, jest before supper time.

"Righto, my lads," he says, without botherin' to count it. He tosses it over in the corner by the cabinet where he keeps his liquid supplies. Him not more than having half-turned his back till Lord Buckinum, this billy-goat, ambles over an' starts nosin' into it.

"Tally-ho, m'lord!" cries the Quince. "I say, yoicks!"

He grabs the billy by the collar an' drags him away.

"Watson, y'know," he says, "p'rawps you had better conduct Lord Buckinum outside for the night, what!"

It's a job, but it's also a pleasure. I shove this billy into an' empty shed an' shut the door.

"You know, by golly," says Larry, "I believe that damn goat would swaller down that money like so many turnip tops if he had the chance!"

"The only difference," I comments, "between goats an' cowboys bein' that the latter takes theirs liquid."

Night on the rangeland. Then come the dawn, an' with it, ol' Bullhide Toomey after his election money, bright an' early—well, anyhow, early.

Now to make it a small skunk an' soon skun, he don't git it. Knowin' the Quince don't like to be waked up so early, I slip in with ol' Bullhide after that cash, an' what you reckon we find? Curled up on the Quince's easy chair is Lord Buckinum, sound asleep. Figger it for yourself. The window is open, like the Quince gen'rally leaves it to be ready for throwin' empty bottles out of. Lord Buckinum's belly is bulged out rounder'n a full moon, an' except for a half dozen scattered an' chawed up bills layin' around the floor, that money is plumb gone. It jest ain't there, that's all.

"My gawd!" groans ol' Bullhide. "Somebody's stole it! There goes our ol' election!"

"Stole hell," I yelps. "Squint your best eye at that goat! He tried to git his nose into that money sack last night when we brung it, now—"

"Ba-aa!" says Lord Buckinum, wakin' up an' twitchin' his tail. *"Baa-a!"*

"I'll *baa-a* you, you blankety-blank son of a son of a son!" snorts ol' Bullhide, grabbin' a chunk of fireplace wood.

Now I maybe ain't fond of goats personally, but I know how my boss feels about Lord Buckinum, specially since he learns to drink whiskey.

"Wup, there, Mister Toomey," I says. "If there's any goat butcherin' to do around here somebody wearin' the Flyin' Bottle brand'll see to it. You lay down that saw-log, now, or I'll—"

But he's mad, an' he don't give me time to *say* what I'll do—jest time to do it, that's all. Results: Mister Bullhide Toomey totterin' over aginst the wall, a-nursin' his jaw.

"Ba-aa!" comments Lord Buckinum, too full to bestir hisself.

"An' never mind the hollerin', either, Bullhide," I says. But he's done bellered enough to wake the dead. Already I see the boys comin' on the lope from the bunkhouse to see what the rumpus is about. Yet, although the Quince's bedroom ain't but a dozen steps off, he ain't showed up. Then jest as the boys all comes bustin' in, I see somethin' I hadn't noticed before. It's a note pinned to the cork of a pint on the table. I make haste to read it:

> "Cheerio, Watson! Kindly transmit apologies for my absence to that sterling vote wrangler, Mr. Bullhide Toomey, Esquire, when he calls for the what-y'ma-call-it—mazuma. Do not confine Lord Buckinum unduly. The poor lad will miss me, what! Explanation, elucidation, clarification and all that rot upon my return, Watson. Tallyho! To the hills! A most urgent mission, and in most admirable company. Yoicks, my lads!
>
> "Most affectionately,
>
> "Your Quince."

"Hell - behind - the - haystack!" exclaimed ol' Jonk. "He's gone an' eloped with that widder!"

"Widow hell!" snorts Bullhide Toomey. "Eloped, my foot! It's a frame-up, that's what it is, to double-cross me outa them 300 bucks! Jest lemme at that goat! I'll might quick rip him open an' see—"

"Wup!" says Larry Pinell, grabbin' him. "Here's what you'll see, sir an' mister, accusin' the Quince of doublecrossin'!"

What Larry is showin' him is the nearest openin' to the great outdoors, often referred to as a door. Bullhide takes it in one nice hurdle. An' the last we see of him is his fist, shakin' at us as he passes over the hill.

"The question, now," opines Ed Patterson, "is will the yonder-goin' Mr. Bullhide electioneer the *paisanos*

for the Quince today or won't he?"

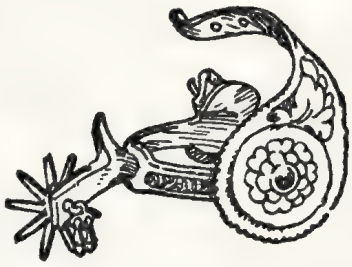
Don't strike me as much of a question. Nor ol' Jonk.

"But the money inside that goat," protests Gramp Simes, "hadn't we better—"

"Fergit it," I busts in. "It'd be plumb ruint by now, anyhow."

Now to make it a little pot an' soon boiled, all the time I give the boys off that day is for 'em to cast their own votes. Me, I do quite a bit of ridin', from one pollin' place to another. Judgin' from the talk it looks like a mighty close election.

The polls close up at six. It's gittin' on towards 11 P.M. when me an' the boys is all gathered up at the main house, wonderin' what's become of our boss. If he ain't showed by midnight we're aimin' to take out to hunt for him.



All of a sudden three riders comes lopin' up.

"Pippo, my lads!" cries the first one. It's the Quince.

"Howdy, boys!" calls out the rider in the rear. It's the voice of ol' Ab Jenobee!

The rider between 'em don't say nothin'. I take note in the moonlight that his hands is lashed together, an' there's bulgy sacks tied on behind all three saddles.

"*Sheriff* Jenobee—he jolly well fetched him, what!" says the Quince. "Y'know the blighter that robbed the bloomin' bank!"

"I had help, boys," says ol' Ab. "Mighty salty help, at that, from *Sheriff* Winterbottom. I come ridin' by last night, aimin' to rouse out a posse here to take the trail with me, but your boss, gents, he insists that as candidates fer sheriff, it's kinder up to us two to trail this hombre, jest ourownselves. Them *politicos,* the present sheriff an' his deputies was too busy with politics, I reckon. It taken us quite a spell, but here he is, an' the stolen money, to boot."

"Speakin' o' money," chirps up Gramp Simes, "that damn goat, Quince, he clumb into the house last night, an' et up that whole dang sack o' ones, yessir, et 'em up, ever'last—"

"What?" cries the Quince. "Watson, you mean to say—"

"Well," I says, "Lord Buckinum did git into the house last night, Quince. But not through no window. I led him in through the door. An' about the money—I reckon he *might* of et it, if I hadn't first took it outa that sack an' put turnip tops in there instid. You see—"

"Yoicks, Watson!" busts in the Quince, whatever that means.

"Why, you damn ol' pole-cat, Hoss-Tail!" snorts Gramp Simes. "You done that, an' left us thinkin' that—"

"Oh, quite," says the Quince. "What I mean to say—y'know—almost. The vote for sheriff, lads, we just learned from a bally rider passing by, is a—y'know—a what-y'ma-call-it."

"A tie, *Sheriff* Winterbottom," grins ol' Ab Jenobee.

"Righto, *Sheriff* Jenobee," comes back the Quince. "Droll, what!"

But the way it come out, it wasn't a tie, on the recount. It was Sheriff Jenobee, by eleven votes. I reckon them eleven was prob'ly some I'd wrangled for ol' Ab with some of them one-buck bills of the Quince's that I'd sayed from Mister Toomey an' the goat. But don't think I wasn't bein' loyal to my boss. On that note he left he'd wrote "over," an' on the other side:

"Watson, in the name of fraternity, equality, liberty, freedom, the sacred estate of bachelorhood and all that rot, *don't permit my election as sheriff today if it costs your jolly ol' life's blood, what! My future is in your hands!*"

So, fortunitly, was quite a few one dollar bills.

N. H. Rose Photograph

Here she is! Belle Starr, the woman who led the James Gang. She carried a pearl-handled sceptre of authority at her hip.

A WOMAN LED THE JAMES GANG!

SENSATIONAL EXPOSE BY

BILL STILES

Last Surviving Member Of The James Gang

As Told To ED EARL REPP

She Laughed At Jesse James And Cole Younger, Did This Western Gun-Girl, Dared The Outlaws To Go Against The Lightning Draw Of Her Tied-Trigger Sixes, Taunted Them With The Knowledge That They Were Afraid Of Her Gun Skill—And Was The Real Leader Of The Gang Bearing Their Names.

(Editor's Note)

For almost fifty of his eighty-four years Bill Stiles, author of this story, was an outlaw. Sometimes he lone-wolfed it, other times he was with various gangs—including the Jesse James and Cole Younger outfits. He has spent thirteen years of his life in Sing Sing for a killing in New York—and was for five years a trusted lieutenant of Jesse James and Belle Starr—or until the gang broke up. Stiles was reported killed in the famous bank raid made by the gang at Northfield, Minn., but escaped alive. He is the only living survivor of this notorious outlaw band and the only individual able to speak with authority on its adventures, inner rivalries and killings.

N. H. Rose Photograph

The Father Of The Gangs was William C. Quantrell, noted Civil War guerilla. It was he who educated Belle as a spy and taught her how to live a life of outlawry.

Regardless of what others have written of her, Belle Shirley Starr was born on February 3rd, 1864, in the Kentucky mountains. There she grew up. Her people were constantly embroiled in the feuds of the Hatfields and the McCoys. As a young girl she saw and took part in actual killings and soon learned to handle a gun like the rest. Like the others of

her clan, she learned to hold human life cheaply and had no more qualms about shooting a man than she would for shooting a rabbit for the stew pot.

Although Belle personally gave me these facts about her early life, I cannot recall just when the family moved out of the Kentucky mountains. I do know that she was quite young when they left to settle in what is now Oklahoma. As Oklahoma was then overrun by Indians, and unfriendly toward the whites, they were driven out and went down into Texas. Somewhat later, she told me, they moved to Missouri where they settled in the town of Carthage. As time passed, her father became well-educated and eventually became a Judge. From that time on, history seems to have the facts of her life fairly straight, except that it overlooks completely her connections with the Jesse James gang.

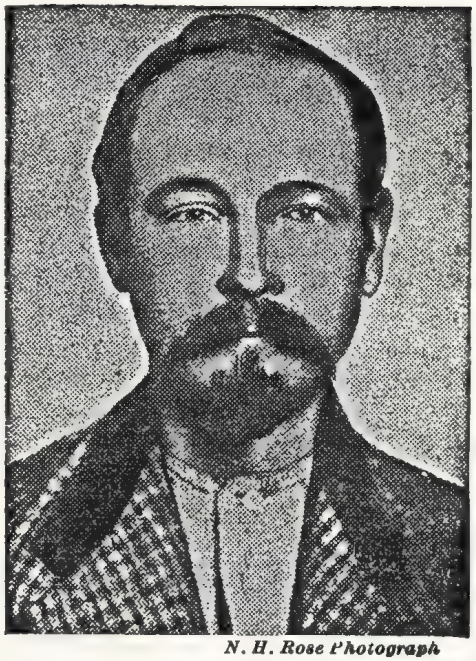
If what she told me is true, Judge Shirley was an exceptionally brilliant man. Heredity may have had something to do with Belle's capacities, for she was as bright as a new dollar. No more cunning, shrewd, and generally brilliant woman have I ever known. All this contributed to her success as the brains of the Jesse James gang, at least while I was with it. That was for five years without a break. But smart as she was she didn't have enough brains to keep her on a straight path. Her early training was in her blood. Guns she knew as other girls of her age knew their home-spun dolls. She always wanted her own way—and got it regardless of the cost to herself or her friends.

It is true that she took up the outlaw trail for the love of a man named James Reed, whom she married during the year 1866. A year later a daughter was born to them, whom they named Pearl. In 1870 Reed became a known fugitive after killing a man, and took Belle and the baby to Los Angeles. There in 1871 a son was born to the union. They named him Edward, in honor of Belle's brother, Captain Ed Shirley of Quantrell's guerillas.

Los Angeles authorities got after Reed and he promptly deserted his family to return to Indian Territory where he associated himself with Tom Starr and his son Sam, who lived some distance west of Fort Smith. The Starrs were part Cherokee and bad hombres, but no worse than Reed. Belle took her two children and, dressing herself in boy's attire, eluded officers and streaked for Carthage.

I know that Reed was not the only man in Belle's life. Yet she trusted none, even her second husband, Sam Starr, whom she married eventually after Reed was shot and killed at Carthage by John Morris. The killing took place along about 1875, a year before we staged the Northfield Bank robbery, using the combined James-Younger gangs. She had a warm case on Cole Younger and possessed a bright eye for Jesse James which, among other things, resulted in bad blood between the two. I'll touch on that subject a little later on.

As for Belle, she had the kind of a physique that fascinates strong men. She was a strong, powerful woman. Her strength was combined with a tireless energy and daring that bordered on sheer recklessness. These characteristics would unquestionably have carried her a long way on the right trail. She was very fond of good books, fine horses and money. She was not exactly beautiful, nor even pretty, yet she had a charming personality when she wanted to show it. Her height was about my own, five feet nine inches. Her face was rather thin, like a great many of her breed. Her eyes were peculiar. They were blue when she was in a good humor, but when angered they were transformed into black dots. At those periods they pierced you to the heart. It was then that the gang left her alone, even Jesse and Cole Younger. They knew the murder sign and respected it.



N. H. Rose Photograph

Two wolves of the wilds are these. Jesse James, left; Cole Younger, right, and they fought one of the strangest duels of history. No shots were fired but they sat staring at each other all one night, each jealous of the other's relations with Belle Starr, the gun-girl who sought to bring both bands together under her leadership.

Whatever else she might have been, she was a master horsewoman. And she knew horses better than any of us. It was her pride to be able to accurately tell a horse's age without inspecting its teeth. How she did it, I never learned. Aside from that strange power, she was a dead shot with pistol or rifle. She invariably wore three guns, two on her rather broad hips and one carefully hidden in her right boot-top. More than once she gave us a demonstration of her shooting ability. On one occasion while we were camped in the Wisconsin timberlands she rode up and dismounted. In our bunch at that time was a newcomer whose name I've long since forgotten. Anyway, this fellow made a smart crack about Jesse having a woman in camp. Belle heard that remark and it was the last that hombre ever made.

She walked up to him deliberately. We were sprawled out in a bunch on the pine needles. He was lying within a few yards of me. Calmly she came up and with a well-placed kick buried her boot-toe squarely in his middle. With a yell he leaped up and drew back his hand to slap her face. But the poor, ignorant cuss did not know Belle Starr. Nor did his upraised hand descend upon that thin cheek of Belle's. Quick as lightning she drew her right gun. When the smoke cleared we saw the fellow standing paralyzed in his tracks, blood streaming down his face from a gaping wound along his left temple. His eye was shot away and his mouth hung open in a kind of blank astonishment. Then slowly he wilted to the ground, writhing. With a low snarl that might have come from the throat of a tigress she let him have another slug through the head. He died instantly.

That was my first real introduction to Belle Starr's guns and I was destined to look into them myself before very long. First I want to impress you with Belle's deadliness.

Jesse himself was what you'd call

greased lightning on the draw. Cole Younger was a trifle faster. I've seen them both in action. But I saw Belle beat them both by a split second.

She was a human tigress in her outlaw rôle, but she had a strange mixture of good and evil in her make up. When crossed she would kill or deliberately shoot to maim. Yet she had a soft spot in her hard heart for children, possibly because she loved her own so dearly. Men feared her more than any gunman in the west at that time because of her complex for maiming rather than killing outright.

Along about 1877 I knew a trio of *malo hombres* known as Blue Duck, Jim French, and Jack Spaniard. I'd met them at Deadwood where I also encountered Sam Bass, Joel Collins, and Henry Underwood. The latter three had just come up from Texas with a trail herd of longhorns and were engaged in a sky-limit poker game in a local saloon. They lost their money and took up the trigger trail to regain their fortunes.

But returning to Blue Duck, he borrowed about $3000 from Belle and went with French and Spaniard to Dodge City to spend it. These men were members of Belle's private gang of outlaws and never to my knowledge ever came into contact with our own James bunch. At any rate, Blue Duck lost his roll to some crooked gamblers and carried the story of woe to his boss, Belle. She immediately went up in arms and called Blue Duck everything she could think of for being so yellow-livered as to let the gamblers get away with such a cold deal.

She then rode post haste in to Dodge and entered the saloon in question. The tinhorns were pointed out to her by friends and she promptly collected Blue Duck's $3000. She also collected interest in the amount of some $5000 more. That done she notified the gamblers and all within her hearing that she had overdrawn her account and if they wanted the difference, they would have to come down to Indian Territory after her to get it. She backed out, mounted, and so far as I know, never returned to Dodge City.

Some of the worst gunmen the frontier ever knew were in that saloon at the time, yet not a one of them risked his life against her. It would have been suicide for them to try drawing on Belle Starr and they knew it, for by now her reputation extended from California to Illinois and from the Dakota Territory down to Dallas.

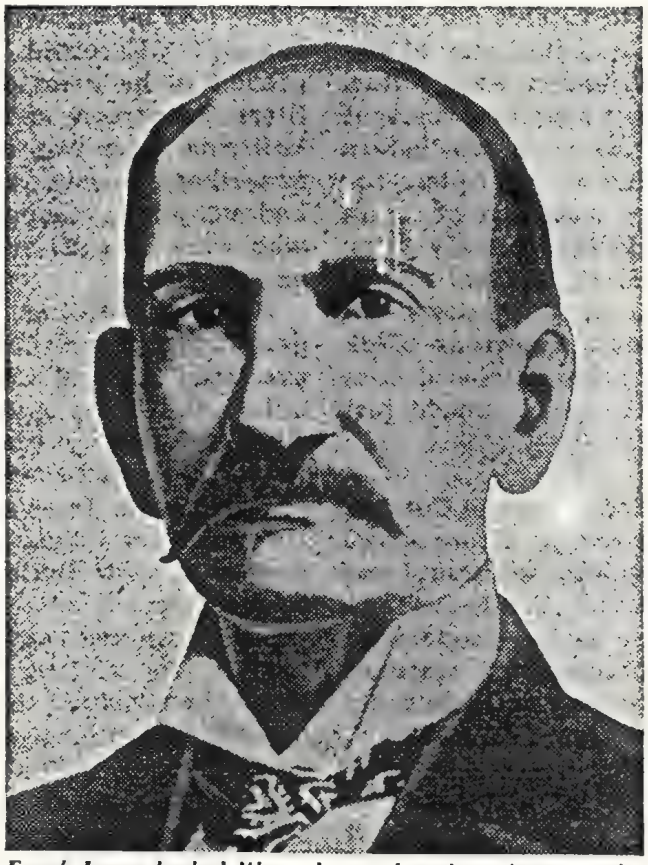
Once I took a vacation from the James gang and went to the Canadian River country in Oklahoma where Belle had a fine large log house furnished with expensive rugs, a piano, and many book shelves. She was very fond of the kind of books, that indicate a good education and culture. Although she had everything a woman could wish for, she continuously rode out on the trigger trail. It was her old spirit, born and bred into her in the Kentucky mountains, that kept her the Queen of the Outlaws.

I had heard much of Belle Starr a long time before I actually met her. In every case I was warned against her fiery temper and was told not to stand in her way, that if she wanted me I had better humor her. Everyone had to give in to her will, but I seemed to be the only one in the James gang that she favored. This sounds like bragging, but it is an honest fact, for she later saved my life by throwing her guns on me.

For sometime I had heard that she was the real boss and brains of the James gang, but scarcely believed it until I saw her in our camps. Usually a couple of weeks, sometimes days, before we pulled off a job, she would ride in to hold conference with the leaders, Jesse and Frank. I soon put two and two together and learned why our raids were so profitable and

successful. It was Belle Starr who picked our spots for us. It was Belle Starr who put her uncanny ability as a spy to work to get us the inside information that made known to us which train or trains carried the most loot. Without her I doubt now if the gang would have lasted near as long as it did, or have obtained such rich hauls over such a long time.

Sometimes she liked to dress up in all the feminine finery she could find. At those times, she was really a charming woman. She had the personality and schooling to make her interesting to the society matrons with whom she associated on those occasions. Her education as a spy under Bill Quantrell (where she first met the James boys), combined with her other charms, made her ideal for the part she played in the inner workings of the gang.



Frank James looked like a deacon but the only prayer he knew was one that he wouldn't miss his target. Frank stood up for the author when Belle Starr thought Stiles too young to be a member of the gang.

She would go into Chicago and set herself in with the wealthy element. Here she spent her time with rich men, railroad presidents, bank directors and other élite from whom she learned which banks held the most money in their vaults, or which trains would be carrying the most money into our territory. In this she accomplished a work that none of the rest of us could have done. She got into the confidence of certain men from bank clerks to bank presidents, from telegraph operators to express messengers and their higher bosses. And then she would tip us off to the trains we were to hold up and the banks we were to raid.

It was through her efforts that we knew beforehand where the Pinkertons were and who of them was closest on our trail. Her tips enabled us to avoid them or trap them, depending on Jesse James' mood. She was fearless, nerveless. She was on the same train coming from the east with a man named Whichter, Pinkertons' finest detective, who had been sent out to take charge of the operatives and capture us. She got into his confidence and even travelled with him to Missouri. Needless to say that she made a sucker out of him and proved once more that men, no matter who they are, can be transformed into amorous monkeys by feminine charm. I often wondered what he said when he found out he'd been hoodwinked by Belle Starr! He never caught us, nor even got near enough to see us. Thanks to Belle.

I never knew when she would show up in our camps or ride with us. At

times she would be away for months, yet the leaders received code messages from her constantly.

I remember when we were camped near Otterville in Pettis County, Missouri. For some reason we lay in camp for several days waiting for some member of the gang to show up. The camp was dismally quiet, though at times we talked of the job we were to pull off. We were to rob a certain train at Rock Cut, but none of us, even the leaders, seemed to know just which train was to receive our attention. Rock Cut was just east of Otterville on the Missouri Pacific line. There was a bridge spanning the spot and trains had to slow up before crossing it, making an ideal place for a holdup. There were ten of us in the gang: Jesse, Frank, Charley Pitts, Bill Chadwell, Clell Miller, Henry Underwood, myself, and others, including Dick Liddil, known as "Dick the Knifer," and some more bad ones whose names I can't remember just now.

Trains rumbled up to the Cut and crossed the bridge. From where we lay holed up we could see them as they crossed. We looked impatiently at Jesse as he strode with equal impatience among us, warning us to keep quiet and not to leave camp for any reason whatever. He stalked back and forth like a caged lion, cursing sometimes, listening intently at other times. By this we grasped that he was waiting for someone of importance, eager to hear the approach of hoof beats.

Along after dark, guards were set and the night went on slowly. Some of us slept on the ground, having had orders to keep our horses saddled. In consequence we had no blankets, because we always used those under our saddles. For supper we munched corn pone that had been soaked in possum grease. We always carried that in our saddlebags for emergency, and I must admit it is not very palatable when cold, for it is too greasy.

Suddenly from the distance we were aroused by the drumming of hoofs. Horses were running somewhere. Every man was awake and on his feet. None of us knew but what the Pinkertons were closing on us. But our fears were groundless, although Jesse sent us out to circle the approaching riders when they got within range. At length we could see the riders, two of them, by getting down flat on the ground. They were outlined then against the sky. They thundered up and were promptly surrounded. Escorted into camp they proved to be none other than Belle Starr in person and a man named Williams who was a deputy sheriff as well as a member of the gang. We had many men among the law officers who were in with us. Williams was one of them.

Belle was riding a fine, spirited gray horse. It was the first time I had ever seen her and I thought she was a boy until she got off her horse. Then I knew by her shape and the way she walked that she was a girl. She went with Jesse and Frank to one side and they talked quietly for some moments, with Belle doing most of the talking.

But Jesse was mad at having been held up for so long and he said so. While he admitted that without Belle getting him information and naming the jobs to be pulled he could never have made a go of his career, he resented her mastery over the gang. He was jealous of her. Yet he could do nothing about it, for when he complained of her being late she promptly quieted him with a crisp order to shut his mouth and listen. We could not help but hear it. And when she said it she was fingering her right hand gun. It was evident that Jesse also feared her, for he shut up pronto. Frank said nothing, for he recognized in Belle an ingenious ally who could not be replaced.

Anyway, we had been waiting at Otterville for Belle to bring us word as to which train would be carrying

the most money through Rock Cut. It developed that she had had some difficulty in obtaining this information, which explained her lateness. Suddenly the conference broke up and we were ordered to mount. With little time to spare we landed at the bridge, Belle riding with us. The Rock Cut raid is a matter of history, and there is no need to go into details again except to say that we robbed the train Belle picked of $25,000 and made a clean getaway. Due again to Belle Starr. But that was not the only time when she counseled the band. She unlimbered her guns on the train crew with the rest of us and nobody knew that she was a girl, for she looked like a boy in her trail clothing.

After robbing the train we rode all night to the westward. Belle went with us. Williams beat it back to his post in town. I think he was a deputy in Otterville, but I'm not certain. There is one thing about my first meeting with Belle that I never will forget. That was the look she gave me the next morning when we selected a camp at dawn. I was so young then, being only 17, a mere youth among older men. She was older than I was, perhaps by 10 or 12 years.

As we pulled up, she spurred her horse beside me. I was dismounted. She glared down into my eyes, at the same time fingering her guns. I thought at first she intended to shoot me for some unknown error I might have made during the holdup. But I'll never forget that look. It seemed to bite through me, as if she was searching her memory in an effort to find out if she'd ever seen me before.

"Who are you, boy? she demanded sharply.

"Bill Stiles," I said, trying to smile through my fear of her.

"You ought to be in school, you young idiot!" she stated. "This is no place for you!"

"He's all right, Belle," grinned Frank James from the other side of her horse. "Take a look at his gunbutts when it gets light enough for you to see the notches. He might be a kid in age, but he's a man in experience. Bill's been with us quite a spell now and knows the country. We need him."

"I'll talk to you later, Stiles," she said, turning to Frank. "Don't leave camp until I tell you!"

I wondered what she intended to say or do to me and had better sense than to demand a showdown. I tried to decide if I'd made a mistake that offended her, but could not find any fault with my work. However, she talked with Frank for some time and it was about another raid she had planned. It was the raid to be staged at Glendale on the Chicago and Alton line. I went to look after my horse, glad to get away from those piercing eyes of hers. I knew she would have no more compunction about shooting me than she had about killing that other man. But I was soon to learn why she had raked me over.

From time to time I had been visiting the daughter of a farmer at Independence, Missouri. Needless to say I was plumb sweet on her and she was mighty nice to look at. I will not give you her name, for she is living in Los Angeles today, the wife of a respected citizen and a member of Bob Shuler's church. But I was madly in love with her, or at least so I thought. But when it comes to choosing between the girl you love and death, well, life is pretty sweet, also, and that was the choice I had to make, thanks to Belle Starr and Jesse James.

We were getting ready for the Glendale raid when I drifted into Independence again to call on my girl. The law was hot after us then and we had to be on the lookout at all times for Pinkertons. Every man was on fighting edge and ready to shoot on an instant's notice. But nobody in Independence knew me as an outlaw and a member of the James gang. I went into town and likkered up a

bit, but did not get drunk. I never did. Thereafter I went a-calling on my lady love.

As I stood at her front gate talking to her who should ride up but Belle Starr! She came galloping and as mad as a wet hen. I looked up and shivered under the cold light in her eyes. I thought it was all over with me then and there, for her guns were out and on me in a flash, both of them. I never knew gun muzzles looked so ugly up to that time. They looked like twin tunnels.

"You, Stiles!" she spat crisply. "Get on your horse!"

"What for?" I inquired, trembling.

"Don't you know you can talk yourself to death?" she hurled back, and I could see she held her gun hammers back under her strong thumbs.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Shut up and climb on!" she ordered.

The look in her eyes warned me to do as bidden. I mounted and together we rode down an alley as fast as we could go. Hardly had we gotten off that street than we heard the drumming of hoofs up town. Then Belle pulled up and told me frankly that I had been fraternizing with the daughter of a family hostile to the James gang and that even at that moment Jesse himself was en route to the house to kill me if he caught me talking to the girl. Some member of the gang had tipped Belle and Jesse off that I was talking my head off to the girl. Belle got to me first and unquestionably saved my life, for Jesse would certainly have shot me down had he caught me.

At that she almost scared me to death and when Jesse hauled me on the carpet later she helped me prove an alibi. She said that she found me in a saloon and not at my girl's house as the informer had stated. As far as she was concerned, it was a case of mistaken identity. But why she did not kill me unceremoniously, I do not know, unless she had taken a mother's interest in me. They had been afraid I might accidentally drop some information to the girl about our camp location and our plans. Of course, I had better sense than to do that, for I was heart and soul in the gang and would not have confided in my own mother, let alone the daughter of a man hostile to the gang. There were many families for us and many against. I had the bad luck to fall for a girl of the latter clan.

"You stay away from that house, Stiles!" Belle commanded. "A slip of your tongue to that girl could hang us all. You've got your choice—the girl or—"

And she fingered her gun as she spoke. I knew what she meant. If I saw the girl again I'd be killed. I was no fool, even at 17, and I never saw the girl again until a year or so ago. We left Independence soon after that incident and the Glendale raid was pulled off as Belle had planned it. We worked swiftly and in broad daylight, netting us something like $20,000. There was little action in this raid for it was done too quickly. We simply halted the train by throwing up the red light semaphore and then covering the train crew. After that we went to the express car, where the agent was given a whack on the head by Jesse, who took his keys. Jesse opened the vault himself, with Frank at his side. Belle sat her horse at the car doors, her guns out, looking for all the world like a gun-crazy youngster out on a shooting spree.

As I have said, Belle had a warm case on Cole Younger while we were planning the Northfield Bank raid in 1876. He was a rather handsome cuss and at times wore a neat Van Dyke beard and a mustache. He had pleasant blue eyes that twinkled good naturedly. But like Belle's, they could become dark coals filled with a murderous hatred.

I remember when Jesse and Cole had a serious fight over her. I doubt if Jesse ever thought twice of her as

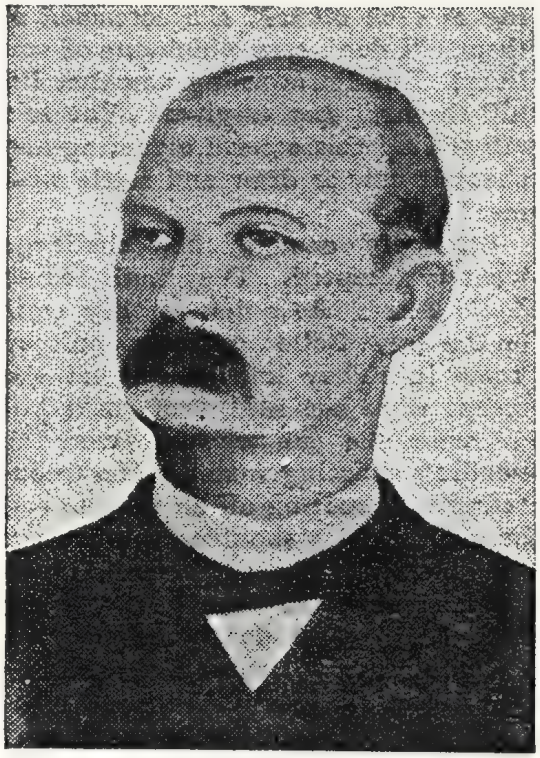
a sweetheart, but he did resent her domination over him. Cole sided with her in this respect and Jesse learned to hate him for it. Younger was crazy about her, in his way. As for Belle, she never really loved any man but her first husband, Reed.

The whole trouble started when Belle undertook to assume complete control over the combined James and Younger forces. Just how she meant to usurp the positions of the leaders I do not know. Unquestionably she would have won out in the end. I do know, however, that Cole was with her in the scheme, possibly because he hated Jesse or was jealous of him. The whole thing simmered along for some time until we started out to raid a bank at St. Genevieve, Missouri.

In those days most of the settlers were destitute and so poor that their homes contained little or no furniture at all. On our way to St. Genevieve we stopped one night at such a house. It contained one large room that served as dining room, bedroom, and kitchen. Like a good many of them then, the room was lined on either side with bunks. One side was used by the men and the other by the women. As it was raining hard we were glad to put in here for the night, soaked down and cold. The people there happened to be James sympathizers and admitted us without question. We all bedded down together, with Belle going to the women's side.

After supper the leaders took counsel and the argument between Jesse and Cole became loud and heated. Jesse openly accused Belle and Cole of riding against him. Frank was neutral, for he recognized in both Belle and Cole valuable assets to the raids on schedule, mainly the bank at St. Genevieve and the Northfield raid. He said nothing. Belle threw her guns on Jesse when he accused her, but he made no move to take up her challenge. He had better sense. Cole laughed in his face to show his contempt for him.

Threats between the two flew thick



Jim Younger shows none of the traces of an outlaw's existence, yet he too ran with the wild bunch.

and fast, but the argument finally settled down to cold stares. That house was like a keg of dynamite all through that night. None of us slept well, for we expected shooting between the leaders at any instant. We lay in our bunks and watched them in the light of the fire.

Jesse and Cole sat on the edge of their bunks all night long and stared at each other. Each was afraid to lie down lest the other draw suddenly and shoot him. All night long they held their hands within an inch of their gun-butts. At the slightest move they would have drawn their guns and cut loose. As for Belle, she curled up in her bunk and went to sleep as if nothing disturbed her at all. When morning arrived she awakened to find them still staring at each other. She temporarily settled the argument with a few words and a slap at her pistol holsters.

"Well, why don't you start shoot-

ing at each other?" she screamed at them. "I don't care which one of you lives! But I'm warning you that I'll kill the man that survives! You two either stop this eternal bickering and shoot it out, or draw and settle with me!"

Strangely enough, her challenge went unaccepted. They both feared Belle Starr. As quick as they were on the draw, Belle was faster and they knew it. They knew also that she meant what she said, that she'd kill or maim the one who survived the pending shooting match. Her reputation for shooting off an arm, an ear, or shattering a shoulder so that the victim would be crippled for life, was what made them fear her. Strong men don't mind dying swiftly, but they do fear the loss of their arms or their eyes.

With bad blood existing between Jesse and Cole, we staged the robbery at St. Genevieve. That was early in 1876 and as usual we got away with only a single shot being fired. This was to frighten the clerks in the bank, and it usually frightened them. Bank clerks in those days seldom had alarm buttons in their cages. In fact there were seldom cages. The money was handed over the counter and taken in the same way. I do not remember how much we obtained in that raid, but it was worth the risks.

Plans were then laid by Belle and Jesse along with Frank and the Youngers to raid the bank at Northfield, a town on the Milwaukee and St. Paul line. Belle did not take part in this robbery, for she left us shortly after the St. Genevieve affair to return to civilization in search of more valuable inside information as to money shipments and bank deposits. I saw her on a train at a small way station between Northfield and the other town. Somewhere she had rescued her finery and looked for all the world like a society matron stranded in the Minnesota wilds. I'd like to know what the conductor and passengers on that train thought when it stopped on signal to pick her up. There wasn't a house within ten miles of the station, which boasted only a few cattle pens, a chute and a platform.

However, we ran into trouble during the Northfield raid. It was staged on September 6th, 1876, and we were pretty badly shot up with little loot to show for it. I got my back peppered with buckshot, and Bill Chadwell and Charley Pitts were killed. I saw Chadwell go down with most of his face blown away. The Youngers, Cole, Bob and Jim, were all wounded, but somehow we managed to get out of town where the two gangs split.

The old feud between Jesse and Cole caused them to part company. Cole refused to go on with us, much to his sorrow, for he and his brothers ran into an ambush in Missouri and were captured after a bloody fight with a posse of local officers. Had they gone with us into the big woods of Wisconsin they would have been safe. But Cole and Jesse were through. The feeling was mutual and Jesse lost no sleep over the split.

Thereafter we had many narrow escapes from death and arrest by the Pinkertons. We had several pitched battles with them and things grew hotter and hotter for us. Yet we pulled off a steady string of raids that must have netted us in all over a million dollars. But I did not see Belle Starr again until after Bob Ford shot Jesse in the back at St. Joe on April 3rd, 1882. And the grave never gives up its dead alive. No matter how many men rise to claim they are Jesse James, he is most thoroughly dead, for I saw his body and identified it as being Jesse James and none other. I know for sure he was killed, for Jesse James had the index finger of his left hand bitten off by a horse. I saw that happen one day on a farm in Wisconsin where we stopped to change horses. Jesse picked a killer

to ride and the horse showed its disapproval by biting off his finger. The Jesse James I saw on a shutter was minus that same finger.

A man came to see me only a couple of weeks ago who claimed that Belle Starr was still alive. Well, I did not see her killed, but I know she was killed by a man, whose love she had spurned, named Ed Watson. I think the date was February 3rd, 1889, her 43rd birthday.

The last time I saw her was at her cabin on the Canadian River. I was heading westward at that time, the gang having been broken up with Jesse's death. I stopped at her place for several days. I think that was in 1878. She was mighty glad to see me and I had to tell her several times the details surrounding the murder of Jesse. Like the rest of us she swore revenge against Bob Ford and she would have killed him had she ever been given the chance.

We parted again. I went westward to Washington state and then down to Tombstone, just wandering. Then I tried to settle down among the Indians up near Clam Lake in Wisconsin. I married the daughter of the tribal chief. Her name was White Fawn, a full-blooded Chippewa maiden. She was pretty as a picture. But some bucks were jealous of me and laid out to kill me. I was returning from a visit to town when they sprang out of the thickets along the trail and shot at me. But White Fawn saved my life. By her strange sense she knew the bucks were ahead, and when they sprang out to kill me she stepped between us. She got a charge of buckshot in the breasts and fell dead at my feet.

For an instant the bucks were startled by her actions. That gave me a second's time to get into action myself. When the smoke cleared I'd killed every one of them—four in number. I went mad for a time and gave up the idea of settling down.

But getting back to Belle Starr—since her life had been so filled with violence, it seemed only natural that she should die with her boots on. She was shot in the back by Watson as she was riding home to Carthage to visit her people. She was knocked off her horse by a load of buckshot, and then her killer calmly stepped out of his ambush and gave her another charge to make sure she would never ride again. Though I owe my life to her, I am forced to say that Watson performed a public service in ending her career. The way I look at life now, we all deserved the same dose, for life is too beautiful to waste in crime.

BALDY'S BLOOD LUST

The infuriated grizzly turned to make his stand.

Old Baldy's Hide Was The Prize Offered In Five Rivers' Biggest Bear Hunt; But Half The Hunters Nearly Lost Their Hides To The Old Grizzly.

By

GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Author of "Nimblefoot's Charge"

All the wild folk of Five Rivers knew that the disposition of Old Baldy, the bear-grizzly, had changed. There had been a time when Lightfoot, the deer, Bugler, the elk, and Split-hoof, the mountain sheep, thought of Baldy as merely a good-natured clown, whose antics amused them. They had even liked to be near him, because the flesh eaters that preyed upon the young of the deer family gave the big deer a wide berth, and seldom ventured to poach on his preserves.

Of recent years, however, the mother deer had taught the wraith-like spotted fawns to quit the country whenever they caught a whiff of bear smell. The herds of Bighorns ranged farther back on the high flats beyond Hurricane Peak, and whenever the lookout saw Baldy's silver

coat flash in the sunlight, he rapped out the danger signal with his hoofs, and soon after the band moved on to another range. For when a grizzly gets old and testy, he becomes more cantankerous than a she-wolf with pups. No thing that lives dares to cross his trail.

The old rogues who no longer follow the love trail in the summer give the whole family of grizzlies a bad name, and deservedly so. When a grizzly gets bad, he is so dangerous that old bear hunters take no chances with him whatever. His kind have phenomenal vitality, and have been known to live long enough, after their hearts have been blasted into a pulp by a .50 caliber bullet, to maul a man to death.

Yes, there was no doubt about it, Old Baldy had turned killer. From the ranches along the lower branches of Five Rivers, the word had been passed to the men who rode up the Vallecito, or over Hunchback Pass, to be on the lookout for the grizzly. The cowboy who brought in the scalp of the big bear was to receive a reward of a month's extra pay and a free trip to Denver, with the beef shipment, in November—a tempting prize to the range riders.

Of course, Baldy knew nothing of this, and he wouldn't have cared a damn if he had, for once a grizzly turns from his natural food of bulbs, berries, ants and grubs to eating baby beef, he is like a man with a thirst, and all else but the rich blood of fat cattle becomes insipid and tasteless to him.

Undoubtedly the fact that Baldy was old and not quite so spry as formerly had something to do with his disposition. He had been slowing down noticeably for two years; once he could have turned over a rock and, without great effort, have caught a sleek gopher as readily as he could pick a blueberry, but now he found it difficult to slap even a fat woodchuck away from the mouth of his den, and as for the little striped chipmunks, they were no longer a part of Baldy's bill of fare.

There had been a time, many years before, when Baldy had ranged from the acorn patches of the San Juan, clear back to where the springs that fed Cataract Creek bubbled from under the rocks on IXL Mountain, but now, he rarely ventured down into the country that the white men with their high-powered rifles had stolen from the poorly armed Utes. Not that Baldy was afraid, he merely used good judgment in avoiding certain death.

However, since the time he had first killed an old cow that had been left behind by a careless rider, he had grown steadily more reckless. In fact Baldy had grown so contemptuous of the efforts of men to protect their property from his raids, that he killed when and where he pleased, and not always because he was hungry. The old he-booger often knocked down a cow for the sheer delight of seeing it fall, and then walked away wagging his head, unashamed of his outburst.

September days had passed—on the calendar of the big bear this meant the disappearance of the vast herds of domestic sheep that ranged in the buckbrush covered basins above timberline, and furnished an abundance of food for him during July and August. Baldy had but to come up close to these foolish creatures, dash among them with a loud "Woof" and then kill at leisure those scattered away from the main flock. The Mexican herders wisely kept away and later explained to their employers, that the missing sheep had been stampeded over a precipice by a night prowler.

The flocks were gone now, the frost-killed leaves on the buckbrush rattled against the sides of the bear as he lumbered down toward the aspen groves, ablaze with red and gold. There would be big blue service berries along the hillsides, and the bulbs

he craved to condition his stomach and shrink it for the long months of hibernation, might be easily dug from the black loam of the creek bottoms.

Baldy was plenty fat enough, in fact no other creature on the range possessed a better coat of tallow under its skin than did the grizzly. He was not hungry, and only a soured disposition accounted for the crime he presently committed.

Coming out on a grassy knoll above a mountain park, Baldy saw a small bunch of cattle lazing near a patch of aspens. His small eyes gleamed with the lust of an old toper, saliva drooled from the corners of his mouth. It would be easy to back out of sight, come up-wind to the aspens, select the animal for his kill, then by a short dash run in close enough for the one fatal blow.

So quietly did the big bear execute his maneuver that the two men lying by the little stream, not fifty yards from the bunch of prize Herefords, knew nothing of what was going on until they heard a terrifying roar, followed by the thudding of hoofs, as the cattle stampeded for open ground. That is, they all ran except the fat yearling heifer that Baldy had chosen—she lay kicking convulsively less than a dozen yards from where she had been standing when the grizzly had broken cover.

These men, however, were of a different stamp than the sheepherders. They rode top saddle horses, and carried strong, new ropes of hard-twist manilla on the sides of their saddles. Fortunately for Baldy, they had left their guns at home and possessed no other weapons than the ropes.

Hardly had Baldy ripped open the throat of the heifer than the irate cowboys came charging across the park, swinging loops that looked exceedingly menacing to the bear. Baldy, however, was enough of a poker player to appreciate the value of a good bluff. He turned away from the heifer and started out to meet the horsemen.

Only horses that had been trained to a point where they had unlimited confidence in the men who guided them, could have been forced near to any sort of a bear, to say nothing of a ferocious grizzly with blood dropping from his jaws, and his eyes green with rage.

The big bay ridden by Dud Stevens shied off to the right, snorting with terror; but the hammer-head buckskin under Jeff Travers was of sterner stuff. The fact was, he was a bit of an outlaw himself, and had no great objection to a scrap, although ordinarily he would hardly have chosen a bear as an antagonist.

Baldy had never seen humans act like these did. It was quite evident that they were not to be bluffed. The hiss of the swinging loops made him curious, but he had no concept of the danger that lay in their snaky coils.

Dud's bay horse circled to the left; the buckskin dodged to the right, partially avoiding the sweeping blow of Baldy's left front claw, which cut through Jeff's heavy cowhide chaps as though the material were rotten cloth. At that moment the loop Dud had thrown tightened about Baldy's neck.

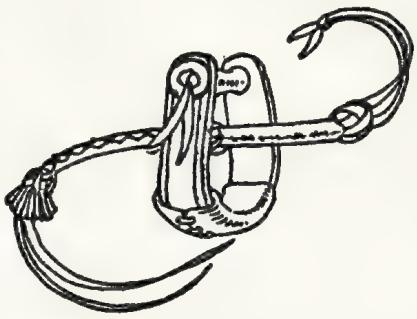
For an instant Baldy could not understand what it was that had shut off his wind, and caused his lungs to burn as they did the time he was caught in a forest fire. Then he felt the pressure of the horn honda against his jaw, and forcing his long claws beneath the loop he shoved it off over his head, with as much ease as though it were a cotton string. In doing this, he had lifted one hind foot off the ground, just what Jeff had been watching for him to do. Instantly a loop swung down and tightened around Baldy's leg. The buckskin horse whirled in the air, and threw his entire weight on the rope. Baldy was completely upset; he landed on his back, his free legs clawing the air,

while he awoke the echoes with his roars.

"Hurry up, Dud," yelled Jeff, "build another loop and stretch him out." But Dud failed to take into account the speed of the grizzly. Baldy did not lay still for a moment, he merely rolled over like a bundle of loose fur, grabbed the rope in his mouth and held it, while he loosened the loop around his leg, and then threw it disdainfully at Jeff.

Then things began to happen. The rushes Baldy had previously made were as nothing compared with the manner in which he charged now. He kept both the horses moving about so rapidly that it was impossible for either of the cowboys to throw with any degree of accuracy. Once he raked the neck of the bay, inflicting a wound that made the horse completely unmanageable. From then on, no power would compel the horse to go near the bear.

Such a fight could not be of long duration, for death lurked in every thrust of the grizzly's huge paws. The cowboys realized that a chance blow might result in serious injury to a horse, in which case the rider would also be killed. They turned down the valley, behind the cattle that had escaped, and rode for their lives.



Baldy, now thoroughly mad, was out to make a cleaning. He made the mistake of his life by following the cowboys out of the high country, trying to ambush them on a high switchback. Failing in this, he ran along the ridge above them, bellowing forth defiance to the whole human race and otherwise taking in a lot of territory.

Not until his temper was cooled by the icy waters of the Vallecito did Baldy call it a day, and cease following the men who had dared to question his right to rule the high range. Even then he growled and grumbled most of the night as he made his way back to the kill and his delayed feast, only to find a pack of hungry coyotes generously helping themselves to the beef. If there was anything that made him furious it was to have his food mussed over by someone else. The coyotes yapped defiance but Baldy soon scattered them.

Even a grizzly slowed down by the weight of years was not to be trifled with; so after a few bawls of self-pity, the coyotes withdrew, leaving Baldy in sole possession of the carcass, except for the whiskeyjacks and bluejays that hopped about, picking up the morsels scattered around by the coyotes.

For two days Baldy stayed in the park where he had killed the heifer, eating more than was good for him, because of the dog-in-the-manger desire to leave nothing for the coyotes.

Fleecy clouds hung over the tops of the back range, a gentle wind sighed through the tree-tops, the first snows were not far distant. Right now Baldy should be preparing for his winter's sleep by emptying his paunch of proteins and distending it with grass, spruce needles or moss, but his debauch had apparently swept all native caution from his brain. He walked about the park wagging his huge head from side to side, in a perfect abandon of ferocity. At times he would sit up on his haunches, beat his chest with his fists and roar, out of pure cussedness, then walk over to the partly devoured carcass, and flop it over, just to exercise his muscles and give vent to his wrath. At such times, even the saucy whiskeyjacks flew away into the forest.

On the evening of the third day snow began falling, and this was what the ranchers and stockmen had been

waiting for. When Jeff and Dud had returned to the Bar T2, and reported their fight with the killer bear, a decision was made quickly. Word went out to every ranch on the tributaries of the Pine, San Juan and Los Animas, to prepare their quota of men and dogs, and have them ready to report at the Bar T2, when the first snow began falling. There was to be such a bear hunt as had never been staged in the Five Rivers country, with a big barbecue and dance when the grizzly was brought in. This time there was to be no foolishness, for Baldy must die, and his hide was to be the trophy of the man who gave him the finishing shot.

The change in weather aroused Baldy and sobered him somewhat. He left the meat, which was no longer palatable to his taste, and went down the hill hunting for the service berries his system craved. As evidence of the change in Baldy's appetite, a fat groundhog, that he might easily have killed, was passed by unnoticed. He was still testy and irritable, but so long as he was not disturbed he would not start another ruckus, nor make another kill.

He spent most of the forenoon in the service berry patch, gorging himself on the medicine he needed. Then he turned back into the rough country again, and started for a den he had selected for his winter's sleep.

Snow fell steadily and there was no wind, so what tracks Baldy made were soon snowed out. He made no effort whatever to disguise his movements, but walked where fancy led, sometimes through the forest, at others among the boulders that had tumbled from the cliffs above.

Having left the park where the heifer had been killed before the ground was covered, Baldy had unwittingly made it tough for the cowboys who swarmed up the valley the day after the snow ceased falling.

On this morning, Baldy reached a large cave at the foot of a cliff just below timberline. A couple of dead spruce partly closed the entrance, the cave was dry and large enough to offer just the sort of retreat a grizzly likes. He spent an hour or two pawing over his bed of leaves, and brush, and getting the feel of the place where he intended to spend the next four or five months, then he came out and stood between the old spruce, and looked off over miles of dazzling white.

Along the ridges and in the high basins, the new snow had fallen four feet deep, and formed huge combs over the cliffs that hung ready to drop at the flutter of a bird's wing. It was an ideal day for a fat bear to make a farewell trip before he settled down for his long nap. The snow was deep enough to make the walking pleasant. He would take one last look over the range on which he had been supreme for thirty years.

He left the den and went out along the ridge for a mile, stopping every few yards to enjoy the view. His body was rapidly gaining the proper condition for hibernation. The drowsiness that precedes the long sleep made all the world seem peaceful and quiet to his relaxed nerves.

Baldy sat up on his haunches and yawned. He was almost ready to turn in. While his cavernous mouth was open Baldy saw something that interested him greatly. Far down one of the valleys, several black specks were moving over the unbroken white, looking for all the world like the snow fleas of the high country. Baldy closed his mouth with a snap and squinted his eyes in order to see better. The short hairs on the back of his neck began to rise.

So, these bothersome men were coming back, were they? Well, if they had any idea of bothering him during the winter, he would knock that out of them at once. He grumbled a little and walked on to the next point, from which he might get a better view. The grizzly's eyes now opened wide with astonishment.

Coming up the valley was a long line of horsemen, followed by dogs of every description. Shepherds, Airdales, a pair of white Russian wolfhounds, and a number of mongrels, all led by a wise old foxhound bitch. Baldy did not like dogs. The very sight of them purged the last vestige of drowsiness from his brain.

All his latent ferocity awakened. He started down the mountainside, directly beneath a huge over-hanging drift of snow at the head of a steep gulch. Then he stopped suddenly and looked over the treacherous mass expertly. If there was any one thing in nature that Baldy feared it was snowslides. He had seen them sweep down a mountainside carrying everything before them. More than once his winter's nap had been disturbed by the roar of an avalanche, and the trembling of the ground shaken by sliding ice and snow. He backed up to the ridge, kept along it for half a mile, until he was out of the path of any possible slide, and then plunged down through the snow into a forest of spruce, making a trail that resembled that of a snow plow.

The hunters had been completely baffled by the absence of any sort of a trail. They had gone directly to the carcass of the heifer, and there viewed the work of the big bear at close range. The dogs had yelped and rushed frantically about the park, loudly proclaiming the presence of game, but they had been unable to find any tracks made by the grizzly.

If Baldy had stayed in his den that morning the men would have been completely beaten, and perhaps turned back before noon. Even now, if the bear had kept under cover of the forest he might have escaped injury, but Baldy's recent victory had made him over-confident. In addition, no grizzly will hibernate in a den that he even suspects has been discovered by an enemy. He walked out into the open country a quarter of a mile behind the hunters, and examined the snow where it had been packed down by the feet of the horses and dogs.

A slight breeze lifted the long silky coat of the bear, causing it to ripple in indescribable beauty, and blew on, carrying a strong scent up the valley to the nose of old Juno, the foxhound, the one experienced bear-dog in the mixed pack. Juno stopped and froze frigid, then turned her head and gulped the air into her mouth, as though she would confirm her nose by tasting the scent she had caught. She bayed loudly. Men turned in the saddles to look; some of the other dogs ran back beside the old bitch, barking excitedly, for they too had caught the bear smell, but were undecided as to its source. Juno turned around, trotted a few steps and then bayed again. Two black and tan shepherds crowded past her and rushed down the valley, jumping absurdly high in their efforts to see over the side of the trail.

Baldy had heard the alarm sounded by the foxhound. It was like a declaration of war to him. Hot blood surged into his brain, making him utterly oblivious of the odds against him. He rushed forward to meet the pack, as eagerly as they came to the attack. He caught the two leading dogs with a blow that sent them high in the air, to fall with broken backs, and then stood defying the whole layout to come and get him.

Pandemonium broke loose. Some of the horses became unmanageable when they heard the bellowing of the bear, and the barking of the dogs. These quit the valley, in spite of the efforts of the men to restrain them, and managed to widen the space between them and the place where the snow was being crimsoned with the blood of inexperienced dogs, who ventured too close to the terrible sweeping blows of the grizzly.

The quick aim of the men who fired at Baldy was made uncertain by the shying and dodging of the horses they rode—a few bullets found their mark,

and these only served to increase the fury of the bear. He became a veritable demon of unrestrained wrath, carrying the fight to men and dogs with an utter disregard for his own safety. Not an inch had he given since first that querulous bawl of Juno's had echoed across the valley. On the contrary, he had driven the howling mob back fully fifty yards, forcing them nearer to the gulch above which hung the treacherous banks of snow.

The men gave no thought to the danger above them, for they were too intent upon saving what remained of their dogs from the bloody jaws of the enraged grizzly. But Baldy was not too mad to remember what he had seen. He could fight men and dogs, but a snow-slide was something else, and he knew very well that the heavy, wet snows of early winter are the ones that start the easiest, on the slippery grass above timberline.

The trail tramped in the snow was marked by the bodies of dead dogs. One man had suffered a broken leg when his stampeded horse had fallen over a cut-bank, hidden by a snow drift. He had been carried to the rear by his companions, who made a temporary camp in a balsam thicket.

This incident had reduced the fighting force for a time, and was a lucky break for Baldy. He did not know why the number of fighters was so suddenly diminished, but he thought that it must be as a result of the furious bellowing that he kept up. Like all wild creatures, Baldy placed a certain amount of reliance upon noise. A bear can no more carry on a fight without growling and snarling than an army can parade without a band, so he roared the louder.

Encouraged by the unexplained weakening of the forces combined against him, Baldy fought with increased vigor, charging the men and horses, regardless of the torture inflicted upon him by the dogs, who were rapidly learning how to dash in from behind, nip Baldy's most vulnerable heels, and spring back out of reach of the paw that was sure to sweep backwards.

There were now but half a dozen horsemen in the fight, and but a small percentage of the original pack of dogs. Baldy had lost some blood, but not a particle of his determination to drive the invaders from the vicinity of his den. He charged with such terrific speed that one of the horses, in whirling away, blundered over a fallen log and fell, throwing his rider directly in the path of the bear, who would have finished that one of his assailants but for the heroism of a cowboy. The cowboy spurred his trembling horse directly into Baldy's path and struck the bear over the head with the barrel of his rifle. The blow was but little more than a slight tap to the grizzly, who slapped it from the hands of the man, knocking it against a boulder twenty yards away.

The man who had been thrown took advantage of the chance given him, and vaulted on behind another man, while the freed horse stampeded out of danger. Baldy's enemies were now reduced to four men and a few badly fatigued dogs. The magazines of the hunters' rifles had been emptied, so they turned back into the gulch a short distance from Baldy, and began taking cartridges from their belts.

The men had given the condition of the snow on the mountain above them no thought. They wondered why Baldy did not follow them. Some who were experiencing their first grizzly fight thought that Baldy was giving up the scrap, something that had never entered the head of the bear. He sat up and apparently amused himself shadow boxing at the dogs. It was as if he wanted to be a good sport and give his badly mauled antagonists an opportunity to rest before he renewed the fight. He kept glancing up the mountain, however, to where small pieces of snow, detached from the

main body rolled down the slope, gathering both in size and velocity as they came. Baldy knew it was only a matter of seconds until one of those rolling snowballs would gain weight enough to start a slide.

The men crammed cartridges into the magazines of their rifles. Jeff Travers had become disgusted by the way the bear had defeated so large a party of hunters. He handed his bridle reins to a companion and stepped off into the snow. Baldy was not more than fifty yards distant, sitting up fooling with the dogs that were by this time too tired to do any damage.

Jeff lined his rifle carefully and squeezed the trigger. Baldy had turned, facing directly toward him. The gun cracked and at that moment, just as Baldy had been expecting, there came a sullen "swoosh" unlike any other sound in nature, but as unmistakable as the pang of death itself. With the speed of sound, the slide was down, and as the fog rose above the valley, Baldy turned away from the fight. He supposed the white death that had swept down upon the men and horses had wiped them out entirely. He made no effort to penetrate the fog, but started directly for the high range he had defended so valiantly.

The dogs made no attempt to follow him, for they had had enough. The big grizzly walked across the valley and climbed up the mountain, taking a bee-line for his den. Occasionally he stopped and looked back over his shoulder, but because of the mist that hung above the gulch he did not see the men who were digging frantically in the snow to release those that had been buried alive by the slide.

Fortunately for the four men who had been caught, there were extra men at the camp of the wounded, who rushed across the valley to help. Nobody gave a thought to the animal that had won the fight. The fact was, everybody was too glad to see Baldy climbing the mountain to wonder why he had suddenly turned and gone back the way he had come.

When Baldy finally reached the trail he had broken along the mountainside from his den, he was very tired. He stopped for a moment to look down into the valley. The hunters were retreating, carrying those who were unable to ride. The snow under Baldy's paws for a moment became crimson from the blood that dripped steadily from a hole in his breast.

Baldy stood on a high point about on a level with the mouth of his den and bellowed a last challenge to his enemies. It was the age-old defiance of his race—the war-whoop that had echoed down through the centuries since the first grizzly had proclaimed his independence and liberty.

Having sent his message reverberating among the cliffs, Baldy swaggered toward his den.

Outside there would be suffering, starvation and lingering death, inside the cave was warmth, comfort and, sleep. Never before had Baldy felt so tired and drowsy. He sniffed at the sides of the cave, walked leisurely to the bed he had prepared that morning, and laid down, stretching out his legs wearily. What light entered the cave only served to increase his sense of security. He gave one last growl of defiance and relaxed.

Baldy did not know that he had gradually been bleeding to death as he climbed the mountain. He had been preparing for this sleep and it was exactly as he had expected. He did not know he had been licked, and so he passed on to the Happy Hunting Ground, secure in the belief that he was an unbeaten conqueror. And his enemies, ignorant of their success, discussed further plans for his defeat. For all eternity Baldy was the winner.

HIGH and SHORT NOVEL

HOME ON

"If anybody sees us we'll have to run," whined High. "I can beat a streak of lightning from here to Texas with the skeer I got."

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

Author of "Big Booger Roundup"

"Hiram, son," said Short, "I been thinking some."

"Shore," grinned High. "I thought you looked sorty tired and worn out."

"Don't get levitous, Hiram. This is serious. Last night I heared some of the boys singing 'Home, Home on the Range,' and the 'Little Gray Home in the West,' and it puts me to thinking. You and me ain't got no business drifting around like we does ever since we can remember. We orta be settled down somewhere. We have followed this herd about a thousand miles. For a whole month we stands double-shift on night herd, and didn't have our shirts dry from the rain. Lightning made our eyes plumb squinty and unnatural. Then we hits it dry and hot, and our teeth warps. Of course, we are natural cowhands, but we got a right to live like humans."

"I might have," jeered High, "but I ain't never heard anybody say you looked like a human, or knew how to act like one."

THE RANGE

All High And Short Asked Was Cartridges And Chuck From Their New Job—But The Chuck Turned Out To Be Boiled Side-Winders, And The Shells All Shed Their Shiny Little Cases And Came Back At Them Trying To Find A Place To Roost.

"Don't, Hiram," mourned Short. "This ain't no time for verbiage and persiflage, and things like them. I got a idee, and—"

"If it's worth a damn, you better wrop it up in a napkin and put it away, like that fellow did his talons," sneered High. "You never had one before that was worth saving, and it's a cinch this one won't draw you no interest."

"High," snapped Short, "if you weren't such a dang fool, you would plumb exasperate me, but I just consider the source, as the fellow said when the mule shaken hands with him. Listen to me, you half-pint of hair, whiskers and run-over boots. I tell you I got a idee that may change the whole course of human events for you and me. It may—"

"If you don't tell what it is pretty soon, you'll forget it," grinned High. "A feller what ain't got no more sense than what you got, hadn't orta ever leave a idee he gets. You can't remember what you had for breakfast, and—"

"Yes, I can," growled Short, "and that's one thing that helps me get the idee. That damned scorched coffee, sour-dough bread, rancid bacon, and warmed over dried apples that we have had every morning for three months, has gave me indigestion, and damn nigh ruint my disposition."

"I been noticin' that it was ruint some," said High. "Go ahead, and get it out of yo' system, before it poisons you. Don't lay it all on the grub. Yo' soul got warped and quit growin' when you kicked the first slat out'n the cradle, and you been gripin' ever since. If you went to heaven and taken a drink of that ambrosia stuff that the preachers talks about, you'd spit it out and ask why the hell they don't put more licker in the punch."

The truth of the matter was that the partners were in a jam. They were not financiers. They didn't have to be. They knew that they had followed that herd from Texas. It had been sold, at a rather boisterous cattle-trading city. They had gone broke in the usual way. Then, the buyer of the big herd had offered them a job, to go on with the herd to its destination. They had accepted, but had told the cowman that they had a little run of hard luck, and got their horses and saddles in hock. They asked for a hundred dollars each, advance pay, and the cowman had let them have it, not knowing their peculiar habits, and besetting sins. There was one thing that they never did, and that was place a plaster on their horses, saddles and guns. Those things were sacred to their persons. They had taken the hundred, and had one more little round of drinks, and poker. They had lied for the money, but they were honest, and followed that herd for the short drive as industriously as if they would have money coming to them at the end of it. They did have—just ten dollars each. They had drawn the pay, and had it in their pockets. Now, they were wondering which way to jump, for their job had played out, and it was getting on toward fall.

All the cowmen in that part of Wyoming were there to see that big herd of Texas steers turned loose on the range. High and Short sat their ragged, sunburned old broncs, looking at a group of men who sat in their saddles talking, a little way from them.

"My idee is this," drawled Short. "We got to have a job, or else starve to death before grass rises."

"Why, you pore, knot-headed dang fool," snapped High. "That ain't a idee, that just a plain, natural fact. You didn't get it. It was already got."

"I know, Hiram," said Short, resignedly, "but you didn't let me finish. Do you see that tall gent, on a flea-bit roan? The one with the Roman nose, curly red whiskers, and one spur on his right hind hoof? I mean the gent, not the braunk."

"Yes," snapped High, "I see him. Been seeing him all morning. He's tall enough to eat hay out of a rack, and ugly enough to skeer everything else away until he gets through. He looks like a hay-haulin' nester, to me."

"Well, he ain't, Hiram. That gent is a small ranchman. I don't mean that he's small, but he's got a small ranch, back in the foothills a ways, and he wants a couple of hands. I have talked to him some, and he likes you and me better than any hands that he has saw with this outfit."

"You mean that you and me is the only two that looks like they was broke enough, and damn fool enough, to work for him," said High.

"Hiram, son," drawled Short. "You should learn to be patient in adversity. You are billious, and more or less upset. You don't appreciate what the gods of destiny drops in yo' lap. Me, I'm tired of scorched coffee, sour-dough bread, and the like. I want to get to a place where the hands eats with the family. I got visions of crisp, brown biscuits, made by human hands, instead of a lousy camp cook,

what puts poison in every mess he makes; of rich, creamy milk and golden butter, home-made preserves, lemon pie, and all like that, et at a table like a human. I can see—"

"I can see that you are broke out thick all over with damn fool, and have got the fever on you bad," snapped High. "Who the hell wants milk and butter? I've saw calfs drink milk, and I have saw butter, but I never et any. It looks like axle grease, to me, and I don't like axle grease. That damned cook has been frying the meat in it for the last week. I want to be driv into camp, and allowed to graze over the grub and pick out what I think my stomach will put up with, or else be snubbed up in a cookshack, where I can cuss if the coffee is cold. Who wants to eat off'n a table? I never seen one that didn't slope away from you, so you couldn't keep up with you' plate, if the meat was tough and you had to put yo' foot on it to cut it, or else slope to'ds you, so yo' plate would turn over in yo' lap, and spill gravy and the like all over yo' pants."

"Hiram, it do look like associating by this time, but it ain't," mourned with me would made you part human Short. "Me, I long to work for a human outfit, where they have heard about 'Six days shalt thou labor,' and all like that. Where they work them six days, and when Sunday morning comes the boys shave, shine their boots, and put on a clean shirt—if they got two shirts. Then they keep the Sabbath holy by playing a few games of poker, or Black Jack, pitch some horseshoes, bust a mean braunk, or engage in some other innocent and harmless diversion."

"Oh, shut up," snapped High. "I done heard too much. I'm following you, like a sheep follers the bell-wether in a snow storm, mainly because I haven't got sense enough to do anything else. Have you told that roaming-nose gent that we'll work for him?"

"No, I haven't, Hiram. I tells him I'll talk it over with you, and see would you agree to it."

"Well, go tell him, and have it over with. We got to do something. We can't sit here on our horses until grass rises, and it looks like that's the only chance we got to eat."

Old Short trotted away toward the group of men. High didn't move. He felt it in his bones that they were due for an unhappy experience, and he didn't want Short to be able to lay it on him. The Roman-nosed gentleman was named Tyler Watson, but few people knew it. He was called Watt, by everybody, to his face, and a good many other things to his back. Short closed the trade with Watt, and told him that he and his partner would go by town, and get to the Flying W by night.

"All right," said Watt, who talked in jerks, as if some of the cogs in his talking machinery were broken. "I'll be there when you get there. Don't you and High get to drinking in Lone Pine, and forget to come on to the ranch. I got some work that has to be did right away, forthwith and immediate."

Short rode back to High, and said:

"Well, Hiram, we are lucky. I got that job for us. I told Mr. Watson we would go to Lone Pine today, and on out to the Flying W to-night."

"Name's Watson, is it?" said High.

"Yes, but I called him Mr. Watson three times, and he didn't even look around. Then I yells, 'Hey, Watt!' and he comes out of it, like a hungry sow out'n a shuck pile."

"Huh," grunted High. "He may be a human, but he ain't very prominent in social circles, if he has forgot that he is Mr. Watson. Makes a feller wonder what his name was before it was Watson. Come on here. Let's get to that Lone Pine place. I want

to sample the licker, and get rid of this ten dollars. I'd rather be plumb broke than like I am."

Lone Pine was a jerkwater cow-town. It had one saloon, and lack of competition didn't raise the standard of the drinks perceptibly. In fact, steady drinking at the Palace Bar would have done more for the temperance cause than all the lecturers in the world. One jag on the poison they had, would make a man a water-drinker for life. Lone Pine was about ten miles northwest from where the big herd was delivered, and the Flying W was fifteen miles southwest from Lone Pine. High and Short had been looking for the town for some time, when they reached the crest of a hill about mid-afternoon, and pulled up. There lay the city at their feet, in a crack in the foothills, where a little stream came down from the mountains.

"Huh," grunted High. "Hell of a town. All on one side of the street. 'Minds me of a French harp that I had when I was a kid. It just had notes on one side. You couldn't make a sound on it when you pulled in the wind. The only way you could do any good was to give out wind. I reck'n the only way you can do any good in this Lone Pine place is to give out money, and take in dang little. It looks like a thief nest, to me. Looks like it's trying to hide, and I don't blame it."

"High," said Short, "I'm pestered about you. It ain't regular and natural for you to gripe yo' head off like what you been doing this morning. If they's a place in that town that sells pills, you better get about a pint of good strong ones, before yo' money is all gone, and take 'em regular for a week or two."

"Go to hell," snarled High. "It's yo' lead. I'll follow you until you are dead, but I aim to keep my fingers crossed, and my hand on my gun. The first gent that looks cross-eyed at me, gets a pill, and it'll be a lead one, you can be sure o' that."

They rode on into the town, or rather down to it. It was too small to get into. There was only one sign in it that was not written with a stick, and tar out of a wagon-hub. That fancy sign was on the front of the Palace Bar and dance hall. It had been painted by a rambling sign-painter, who took his pay in drinks, and was beginning to peel and fade, but it still looked gorgeous in its drab surroundings. Half a dozen horses stood in front of the saloon, with bridle reins on the ground. They entered the Palace Bar, and High took one drink. Then they went out, but not until they had got an eyeful of booger dust and scare seed. There were just six men in the place, besides the bartender. Those six were enough, of their kind, and the bartender, whose name was Chip Ridley, was the crowning glory of the lot. Somebody had given Mr. Ridley something that he had not asked for, and the result was a big scar, and a look of constant surprise and unabated watchfulness in his left eye, while the right lid drooped, as if he were winking at the world. High got Mr. Ridley's attention for a moment, before he left the place, and said:

"Do you know Mr. Watson, of the Flying W?"

"Mr. Watson," said the bartender, in a puzzled tone. "Why— Shore. You mean Watt. Yes, I know him. What's he done?"

"Nothing that I know of," grinned High. "Does a fellow have to do something, to get noticed in this country?"

"Mostly," said Chip, looking a little more astonished. "If he don't do something, he's apt to get something done to him."

"Thank you," said High. "I'll try to recollect that."

The six hard-looking gentlemen had been drinking, and talking in a low growl among themselves. When

High and Short were outside, High said:

"Short, did you see them gents in that place? Each one of 'em packs double, and they are the toughest gents that I ever seen."

"Oh, plenty of innocent gents packs two guns in this western country," said Short. "What makes you think they are tough?"

"I don't think it, I know it," grinned High. "I seen 'em take three drinks apiece, and any gent that can chamber three drinks of that stuff, and live, is plenty tough. I taken one, and my tongue is blistered, and my toes still tingle. Let's get a haircut and another shirt, and get out of here before something bad happens to us."

They went into the one-chair barbershop. The barber's chin and his shears worked together. He asked questions until he ran out of them, and learned very little about the two drifters. Then, seeing how little these strangers knew, he proceeded to tell them a few things. The first, of course, was that he had owned a three-chair shop in Laramie, and was doing good business until his health broke down and he had to get farther up in the hills. He told a good deal more, but the main point that he made with the partners, and one that they were not likely to forget, was when he said:

"I reck'n you seen them six gents in the Palace Bar. Well, gents, them's six of the best things to let alone that they are in Wyoming. Nice fellers, and all that. I cut their hair, and shave 'em, reg'lar, but— Brother, them boys is gunners as is gunners. They have all got notches on they guns, and they have all left plenty notches off'n their guns. I've saw 'em get out in the street here and throw up an empty can. One would keep it in the air until his guns was empty, then another one would take it. They never would let that can hit the ground until all six of 'em had emptied they guns, and then they would give it to one of the girls in the dance hall for a lace handkerchief."

"Right nice gun-work," commented High soberly. "'Minds me of Bill Spradley's wife. She used to make a lot of lace handkerchiefs. She worked at it so much that her eyes gets weak, and on cloudy days she can't see to thread her needle. On days like them, Bill would stick the thread in the muzzle of his old forty-five, and shoot it through the eye of the needle."

That stopped the barber. He opened his mouth to say something, but it wouldn't work, so he just went off and left it open. He didn't speak again until he was cutting High's hair, and High said:

"Who is them gents with the afflicted gunhands?"

"Them," said the barber, "is the Hodnett brothers, Jim, Sam and Joe, and three of their hands, Montana, Kansas and Tex."

"Railroad outfit, ain't it?" said High. That went clean over the barber's head. He had probably never heard of the M. K. & T., so he said:

"No, it ain't. The Hodnett boys has got a little ranch in west of here, and they work cattle natural. All they use is a braunk, a rope, and a gun."

"Which one is the boss?" asked High, innocently.

"The big, black one, Sam Hodnett. He says gee and haw to everything in this part of the country, and makes 'em like it."

That ended the conversation. High got out of the chair, shook himself like a newly sheared sheep, paid the bill, and they left. The barber stood in the door and watched them go to the one general store in town, and said to himself:

"I wonder if them two poor rambling tenderfoots knows what kind of country they have drifted into? They better get out of town before the Hodnett boys get to the shooting stage of their libations and things. If them six gents get hilarious, they'll shoot

the heels off'n their boots, and the conches off'n their chaps, just for fun—and practice."

The partners bought another shirt apiece. Short bought a gorgeous silk handkerchief, while High stocked a couple of boxes of cartridges, and some eating tobacco. They were mounting their horses to leave town when the Hodnett brothers, and their three men came out into the one-sided street and looked them over. The barber thought it would happen then, but it didn't. Sam Hodnett was not quite drunk enough to start it. He might wish afterward that he had started it then.

CHAPTER II

THE FLYING W

High & Short asked no questions about the trail to the Flying W. Watt had given them directions, and they didn't want to talk much to those gunslingers, and the astonished barkeeper. They were well out on the trail, when High said:

"Short, it looks to me like this Flying W outfit has got some right nice neighbors. I wonder do Sam Hodnett say gee and haw to Watt. If he do, I'm apt to forget to turn when he yells."

"We ain't got nothing to do but just order from Watt," said Short.

"I know, but suppose he orders us to take that Hodnett gang apart, and look for something that he's lost? Them gents looks like takers and keepers, to me."

"Hiram, son," said Short, "there's plenty of trouble in this cruel world, without looking for it."

"Shore," said High, "but I'd like to see it first, and I done saw signs of it today. If they's many people in this country like them six gents we seen, and that handsome bartender, I'm goin' to be skeered too bad to have any fun."

"Oh, they won't bother us," said Short. "Spur up, and let's get to the Flying W place before night. I always hate to go to a strange place in the dark."

"Yeah," grinned High. "I been to plenty of places in the dark, that I wouldn't want to in daylight—unless I was crazy."

Short made no reply, and they spurred on along the trail, estimating the distance that they had traveled, and looking ahead for some sign of a ranch. It was sunset when the trail pitched down a steep slope, and they saw the Flying W. It was in a little valley, that looked from where they were to be about twice the size of a tin plate, surrounded by a high bluff on the north and west, and steeply sloping hills to the south and east.

"Dang pore place to run out of, if anything gets after a feller," said High. "I like level country when I'm skeered, and I'm skeered right now. How many hands do this Watt gent work?"

"I didn't ask him," replied Short. "He said he has just a little spread. That he had a couple of good hands, but they left him a while back."

"Yeah," said High, "and if they's as many boogers here as they are in Lone Pine, I know one more good hand that's going to leave him, plumb pronto and sudden. He's got one cow, anyway." A cow with the Flying W brand on her side scampered out of the trail, and ran away toward some little thickets.

They found the ranch house to be a log shack of three rooms. Two considerable rooms in front, and a long room that ran back from it.

"Well, you made it all right," said Watt, as his two new hands rode up to the pens and dismounted. "Unsaddle, turn yo' braunks in the pen, an take yo' saddle-rolls to the bunkhouse."

High had been looking for that bunkhouse, and had not seen it. Rather, he had seen it, and thought it was a chicken-coop, or the like. It stood quite near the ranch house, and was just a pole pen, with the cracks

daubed with clay, and a chimney at one end. A door in one side, a window at the side next the ranch house, and a chimney at the end opposite the window. Neither of the partners spoke until they dropped their saddle-rolls on the floor, and looked about that tiny room.

"If they's any more of this spread than just you and me," said High, "they'll have to stay out doors, or else we will. They ain't only two bunks, and they look like they could stand a trip to the wash woman. Looky, Short."

"What is it?" growled Short.

"Why, them gents went off and left they boots and spurs and chaps and everything. Looky the piece of looking-glass on the shelf. They leaves it right where they been making faces at it."

"Well, what of it?" said Short.

"Nothing, maybe," replied High, "but I'll bet a hundred dollars to a nickel that if I leave here I take my boots and spurs with me, and I don't care how soon and sudden I leave, either."

Short rolled his big gray eyes at the strange appearance of that alleged bunkhouse, but said nothing. The evening was cool, up there in the hills, and High thought it might make the place more cheerful to light a fire in the fireplace. He had just got it going, when Watt appeared at the door.

"This being the bunkhouse," said High, "where is the cookshack?"

"At the house," replied Watt. "My hands eats with the family. I don't want anything to eat that is too good for my men. Supper will be ready in about ten minutes. When you boys are ready, come on to the house." Watt turned about, and went back to the ranch house.

"Didn't I tell," chortled Short, as he unrolled a package and carefully knotted that gaudy handkerchief about his neck. "Here's where we eat human food, with human people."

When they entered the ranch house, Watt and a tall, yellow-haired, raw-boned, horse-faced woman were in the living room.

"Stella," said Watt, "this is High and Short, our new hands. My daughter, Stella, boys. Take seats. Supper will be ready in a little while. We are just all one family here. I won't hire men that I ain't willing to have in my house and associate with."

Short maneuvered for a seat close to the young lady, while High worked just as hard to get a seat at a distance from her. She was, apparently, not hard to approach. She and Short were in conversation within a minute, while High cautiously surveyed the inside of the house, and drew his own conclusions. Presently, Watt invited them out to supper. At sight of that feed, High was not tempted to burst with glee. It consisted of what may have been palatable, human food at noon, but was much the worse for wear. Warmed over meat, cold bread, black molasses, and coffee of questionable character and strength of purpose. The mainstay of the meal was beans, and they cracked when they were chewed, like peanuts at a circus. The feast was presided over by Mrs. Watson, who was not described earlier in the game because it was too big a task. The lady was around fifty, with graying hair, and cold, rheumy gray eyes. Her hair was of the "stringy" variety, and two faded elfin locks hung down at each side of her lean, withered face. When she spoke, which was not often, her voice had the harsh, rasping sound of a file on the edge of a thin piece of metal. She may not have been stingy, but she was at least frugal, and desirous of saving for a rainy day—in a country where it rarely rained.

Short talked to Stella, and toyed with the knot on his fancy neckwear. High ate in glum silence, and when he had finished he rose and left the room and the house.

"High doesn't seem friendly," said Stella, with a pouting smile that made her look as if she were about to neigh.

"Hiram is shy of pretty girls," returned Short, rolling his big gray eyes at the simpering damsel.

Short went into the living room and accepted an offered seat. Mrs. Watson stayed in the kitchen, and Watt stayed with her. High went on to that miniature bunkhouse, poked the fire to a thin blaze, rolled a smoke, cursed under his breath, and settled down to his own meditations. An hour or two later, Short came tripping into the bunkhouse, with a smile that showed through his long yellow mustache, and the laughter of unrestrained happiness in his voice:

"Hiram, old son," he chortled. "We have fallen into a little corner of paradise. Her name is Stella, and that means a star. She is a star, of the first magnitude, maybe bigger than that."

"She's as big as a horse," snapped High.

"Now, see here, High," growled Short, "go ahead and gripe, all you want to, but don't let that forked tongue of yo'n slip, and make any more slight remarks about a young lady. If you don't enjoy being in heaven, that's yo' business, but you ain't got right to criticize the angels, and say the harps and things is out of tune."

"I ain't never been in heaven," replied High, "but this ain't just what I thought heaven would be like, according to what the preachers says about it. If we ain't in heaven, we will be pretty soon, if we eat any more of that grub. I didn't see no butter, and rich, creamy milk. I didn't see no crisp, brown biscuits, warm as a woman's heart, and melting as a baby's tears. I didn't see no home made preserves, and lemon pie. The beans was raw, the meat was cooked last spring, the bread was cooked on the outside, and the inside of it was as cold and clammy as the hands of a corpse."

"Well, Hiram, I got to admit that the first meal wasn't just what I thought it would be, but they weren't expecting company, and they—"

"Company, hell," snorted High, "Old Man Watt said we was homefolks, and members of the family. He—"

"That's the very thing that wins me," declared Short. "To be a member of such a family, with such a girl, is enough—"

"It may be enough for you," said High, "but it lacks a damn sight of being enough for me. My stomach is particular."

"Hiram," said Short," I shore hate to see you take a little thing like that so hard. I never thought you'd be jealous of yore old pardner. You are younger than I am, and if you had of met the young lady half way, she would of been as kind to you as she was to me. Of course, if you had talked to her much, she would of found out that you was a dang fool, but still and all—"

"Shut up," you damned tree-climbin' ape," snapped High. "If you had had any sense to start with, I'd think you was going crazy. Fasten up yo' face, and go to bed."

"I will," said Short. I'll retire to my downy couch, to dream of angels and ambrosia, crowns, harps and joy."

"You'll retire to yo' *dusty* couch, with a knot on yo' head, if you don't shut up and turn in." High had removed his boots and scant garments, and rolled into the bunk that was under the one window, which looked out on the ranch house. Short would have liked much to occupy that bunk, so he could look out the window, and meditate, as the Moslems pray toward Mecca, but he saw that High was in no mood for argument, so the gan-

gling old puncher rolled into the other bunk, and went on dreaming.

The next day was Sunday. In order to shorten the lonesome hours as much as possible, the Watson family slept as long as their eyes would stay shut, and then rested a while before rising. High was accustomed to eating something before noon, and by the time breakfast was ready, he was in a humor to kill without investigation. The breakfast consisted of fried bacon, flapjacks, and coffee. The flapjacks were scorched a little at the edges, but by wallowing them in bacon grease and molasses, which was one of his favorite delicacies, High managed to make out another silent meal.

The punchers went back to the bunkhouse. High kept silence, because he knew no words to express his opinion of the pit into which he had fallen. Short was happy, because Stella had smiled at him, but was afraid to say anything, on account of the ruffled temper of his little partner.

Never before in his life, had Short wanted so much to be handsome. He found an old razor, mug, and a bit of sweet-smelling soap that had been left by a predecessor. After stropping the alleged razor, which had an edge like a hack-saw, on the leg of a boot, which had also belonged to someone who had gone on before, Short lathered his leathery face, and began making faces at the piece of mirror on the shelf. High lay on his bunk, peering out the window, while Short shaved, and envied the chance that High had of catching a glimpse of the angel. He had shaved one side of his face, and tears blurred his eyes, as he peered out that window, over High, and said:

"Hiram, son, what is that green stuff, growing at the back of the ranch house?"

"Beans, you dang fool," snarled High. "Didn't you ever see no beans before?"

"Yes," said Short. "I have saw beans in a bag, in the chuck-wagon. I have saw 'em in a pot, and I have saw 'em on my knife, but I never seen any growin', that I recollect."

"Them's been in a pot," snapped High.

"Sorty thick on the ground, ain't they?" asked Short.

"Shore they are. That lantern-jawed old woman, and that horse-faced gal ain't got sense enough to know that beans orto be cooked at least long enough for the skin to crack. They just puts 'em in a pot and swells 'em good, and when they throw a few out with the scraps, they sprouts and comes up."

"Hiram," said Short. "You may be telling the truth, and you may be lying. I ain't no farmer, and I ain't no gardener, but I do know that I told you not to make any more slighting remarks about ladies in my presence. Maybe those ladies don't know how to cook very well. They ought not to have to lay their fair hands to such drudgery. If ever there comes a day when Stella presides over my humble home, I'll have a cook, to take all that burden from her fair shoulders."

"I don't know how fair her shoulders is," grinned High, "but if you don't either have a cook, or just graze the range, you won't live long on what she feeds you. She couldn't boil an aig under two hours and a half, and—"

"That will do," interrupted Short, with much dignity. "We won't discuss that any further. If I should ever be so fortunate as to have such a home, managed by such a woman, I'd be—"

"You'd be in one hell of a fix," jeered High. "Go on and scrape the other side of yo' face until it bleeds, then poultice it."

That shave was having a sobering effect on Short. The penalty of being beautiful was too extreme for the pleasure it promised. He had shaved one side of his face, and now he had to shave the other. He shaved a quar-

ter of an inch, then stopped and cursed a mile. By the time he was through, he had cursed his way around the globe, and his face was a thing of beauty—if one liked red.

"I'll be damned, Short," grinned High. "I never knowed that bein' in love would make a feller blush like that."

"You go to hell," growled Short, as he dabbed at his face with cold water, having no other means of easing the burning, and putting out the fire that was in his cheeks.

They had a late dinner, and were informed that there would be no other meal that day. The Sunday dinner bore a striking resemblance to the weekday meals, at the Flying W. High made the mental note that if supper was no better than the dinner had been, he could get along very well without it. He went back to the bunkhouse, where he smoked and meditated in silence. Short joined the Watson family in an innocent game of poker. He had held on to six dollars, in his trading at Lone Pine the day before, which was to be the nest-egg of a fortune that he meant to save. When he slipped into the bunkhouse a little after nightfall, he still had fifty cents of it.

"Hiram," he said, as he sat down in the other chair, and the red glow from the little fire brought out the lobster tint of his burning face, "luck is a strange thing."

"Oh, I don't know," said High. "Luck is about like it has always been. Good luck is pretty nice, and bad luck is mighty nigh hell, but it has been in the world so long that it ain't no stranger. Most folks is better acquainted with bad luck than what they are with good luck. I'm going to make me some good luck, if I ever get out on this Flying W range."

"How come?" growled Short.

"I aim to kill a yearling, barbecue it, and eat half of it," grinned High. "They say they's a sort of lizard down in Central Ameriky that don't get fat until you ketch it and sew its mouth up, so it can't eat. I ain't that kind of lizard. I crave human vittles, and plenty of 'em."

Short was in no humor for an argument, just then. High had passed through his fit of rage at what they had fallen into, and now he was beginning to see it as a joke on himself and Short. The gangling old puncher knew that the darts of High's jeering wit would be harder to bear than his rage, so he silently slipped off his boots and went to bed.

Morning came unusually early, for that climate. Watt roused his new hands out long before daylight. They ate breakfast by a smoky coal oil lamp. There were no flapjacks. That seemed to be a Sunday morning delicacy that was not indulged in on week days. The bread was what was left at dinner the day before, warmed over on the outside. The coffee also bore some intimate relation to that of the day before. Probably because the same grounds had been used to make it.

As the east turned pink, Watt and his two hands mounted and took the trail that High and Short had followed into the valley. There was apparently no other way out of it. When they reached the uplands they turned north, and rode about five miles. Then Watt pulled up, and said:

"Now, boys, they's a valley in here that's the north part of my range. I ain't got many cattle, but they's about thirty cows in that valley that's got unbranded calves. You two swing in there, and get them cows and calves, and drive 'em to the ranch. I'll make a round in south of here and get my bunch to the ranch by the time you do yo'n. Then we'll brand the calves. If we get that did today, I'll be satisfied."

"He don't want to do nothin', hardly, in one day," grinned High, as the partners jogged away up the valley. "Thirty unbranded calves, he

said. They won't be but twenty-nine when we get 'em to the ranch, because I aim to eat one."

CHAPTER III

TWO BAD ONES

Mr. Watson may have made some mental reservations, but he had not lied about the cattle being in that valley. High and Short began finding them, soon after they left their boss. This was the work of natural cowhands, and they were at home. As they found the cows and calves in little draws and thickets, they threw them out to higher ground, and went on up the valley, meaning to pick them up as they came back, and drive them on to the ranch.

They had reached the head of the valley, and started back, with half a dozen cows and calves, when two men rode out of the mouth of a deep draw and approached them.

"Oh, oh," said High. "Here comes some gents that aims to cut our herd. It's two of them lace-making gents that the barber told us about."

"Well, what of it?" growled Short. "They got a right to ride the range. If they want to look at what we are driving, let 'em look. We ain't rustled anything. These cows has got a Flyin' W all over the south side of 'em, and the calves is still nursing."

"Shore," grinned High, "but they may want something else. If you want to see yo' little Stella again, you better keep yo' eyes open, and yo' gun hand free of foreign entanglements and the like."

For some reason, only part of the Hodnett Brothers' map was in that particular valley, at that moment. They were, in fact, Montana and Kansas. Perhaps if Texas had been present, he would have understood the language that High and Short spoke, and the map would not have been changed. The two riders came swiftly on, and Montana, a big, dark-browed gentleman, with an overbearing disposition and a torpid liver, roared:

"Hey! What the hell do you two tramps think you are doin'? Don't you know that the Flyin' W outfit ain't allowed to work this range?"

"No, sir," said High, "we shore didn't know that. All we have did to the range is to drive some Flying W cows off'n it. Mr. Watson told us to drive these cows and calves, and I reck'n he didn't know that we couldn't do it." There was a whining, apologetic note in High's voice that belied what was in his mind.

Old Short sat his horse in silence, and let High do the talking. Short had been strangely silent all morning. The fact was that he was puzzling over the peculiar manner in which Stella Watson handled aces. That, and the fact that he had only one measly fifty-cent piece left of his hoarded wealth, was causing him to do some deep thinking. He had flinched when High had said something about his wanting to see his Little Stella again, but he didn't flinch, now, as Montana snarled back at High:

"I don't know what Watt knowed, but I know you drifters can't work this range. Sam Hodnett says you can't, and what he says goes in this part of the world."

"You reck'n this Sam gent couldn't make ary mistake?" asked High, innocently.

"I reck'n he could," snapped Montana, "but he didn't make one about that."

"Maybe not," replied High, "but me and my pardner has done worked this little valley. We got all the Flying W stuff out of the thickets, and we aim to drive 'em."

"The hell you do?" snarled Montana, trying to look worse than he was. "Now, you let me tell you one. Turn them cows loose, and get out'n this valley, while you are all in one piece."

"Just a minute, pardner," whined High. "We been hired to drive these

cows and calves. Let us get out'n the valley with 'em, and we won't come back no more atall."

"No," snapped Montana. "Sam Hodnett told Watt to keep his hands out of this valley. The last time he sent any in here, they didn't go back to the Flying W. They went to heaven—or some place, and if you two don't turn them cows loose and ride from here, you're apt to go the same way."

"Well," grinned High, "this would be a right pretty place to start from if a fellow was going to heaven, but I ain't ready to go yet," High's voice changed to a sharp, ringing note, "and if you two killers don't get away from here, and let us alone, we'll put yo' feet on the first round of the ladder, and yell for the angels to give you a hand as you come up."

That sudden change in High's voice and attitude should have warned Montana and Kansas, but it did not, and they went for their guns. In fact, they drew them clear of the holster. Then two old rusty cannons smoked, and a couple of states fell out of the Hodnett map, and a couple of killers from their saddles. They had ridden with knotted reins, and the horses simply whirled and galloped away toward the mouth of the draw that they had come out of.

"There goes the news to Sam," said High, as he calmly threw the empty shell from his gun, and put in a fresh cartridge.

"Yes," said Short, "and you and me had better go some place. I'm skeered, now, and when I'm skeered, I don't know nothin' to do but run. Let's go from here, before the rest of them lace-makers take us apart and oils the sprockets and things."

"Hold on a minute," chuckled High. "You are the dang fool that leads us into this nice, quiet, peaceful country. I recollect you said something about us not having nothing to do but take orders from Watt. Well, we taken 'em. If you want to run home to Stella, hit the trail. I'm riding a Flying W braunk, and I got orders to bring in these cows and calves. I aim to do just that. I ain't got time to barbecue one of the calves now, so I aim to take all thirty of 'em to the ranch."

"Why, Hiram," said Short. "You know I ain't ever left you in a tight before, and I won't do it now. If you aim to drive them cows, I aim to stay with you, but— I don't know how far them two braunks has got to go, to get the news to Sam Hodnett, and I'm skeered right smart. Let's go."

The partners did not run, but they did use unseemly haste in pushing the band of cattle on down the valley, and picking up the stragglers on the way. Watt met them at the appointed place. He had two cows and calves, which he threw into the little herd, and helped to haze them on down the hill. High looked at Watt's horse and noted that the animal had not been ridden very hard. It was quite plain that Watt had merely stayed out of a hot spot, then driven in two cows, to make it appear that he had been busy. They had penned the cattle, and made a branding fire, when Watt said:

"Did you boys see anybody up the valley?"

"Nobody that amounts to a damn, now," snapped High.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Watt.

"Why, a coupla gents jumps us, and tells us that we can't drive Flying W cows and calves out of that valley, and we has an argyment about it. Seems like they are mad about something, and wants to argue with their guns, so—"

"So, what?" demanded Watt.

"We argued with 'em," replied High.

"And they let you drive the cows?"

"Shore," grinned High. "One of 'em was a big, black-browed gent, and the other one was a long, skinny, hatchet-faced hombre."

"Hell they was," snapped Watt. "That was Montana and Kansas. Two of the fastest gunners in this country, and both cold killers. They are plumb bad. How did you ever argue them out of stoppin' you from driving them cows and calves?"

"Why, they skeered us dang nigh to death," said High, "and we shot 'em, before we thought. I reck'n they are waiting in line for a crown and a harp, by this time."

"You—you mean you kilt 'em?" asked Watt, in astonishment.

"They looked dead when we left 'em," said High. "Don't you reck'n them branding irons is hot by this time?"

Old Man Watt shot an odd glance at his two new punchers, as they went on branding cattle. Thirty-one of the thirty-two calves were branded. A nice, fat one had been left for the last. Old Short had noticed that High, who was doing the roping, had refused to take that calf, several times, when it was in his way. Short was looking square at High when he swung his loop for that last calf. Watt was stooping over the branding fire. The calf got tangled in the rope, in some mysterious manner, and when they got to it, it was dead. Its neck had been broken.

"Well, I'll be damned," gasped High. "I thought that calf fell sorty funny."

"Cut its throat," snapped Watt. "No use wasting the meat. Next time you rope a calf, be more careful."

High looked at Short and grinned, behind Watt's back. They skinned the calf, and Watt went off to the house, to get a vessel in which to put the liver, heart, tallow and the like. When he was out of hearing, Short growled:

"Hiram, son, that ain't much short of stealin'. I seen you break that calf's neck."

"Shore you did," grinned High. "I told you I aimed to barbecue a calf, and eat half of it."

High found a sack of coarse stock salt in a little pen near the corral. When Watt got back, he smelled meat roasting, and he saw long strips of back-strap lying on the coals of the branding fire.

"Why—why— What are you fellows burning that meat for?" asked Watt. "Ain't you gettin' enough to eat at the house?"

"Plenty," replied High, and he wanted to add, "such as it is." "I just been on the trail so long that I like to eat meat that's been killed about a minute, and cooked on a open fire. No offense ain't meant."

"Oh, that's all right," said Watt, remembering that these two drifters had killed Montana and Kansas—or said they had. "Go ahead, if you like it that way."

High and Short went right ahead, roasting meat and eating it without bread. Watt watched them for a while, and then said:

"Wouldn't you fellows rather have some bread with that meat?"

"No, thank you," smiled High, as he gulped a slug of calf-meat. "I recollect one time that Short and me was out two months, without seeing any bread. Part of the time we et meat roasted, without salt, but mostly we et it raw, as it was kilt."

At last, the two drifters were gorged on fresh meat. They didn't care what the fare might be for supper that night. All they needed now was a chance to rest and smoke. They helped Watt carry the meat to the house. When they laid it down, Mrs. Watson said:

"Watt, that must of been just blamed carelessness that kilt that calf. It would of growed into a cow that was worth money. Did you blow into

its nostrils, and try to bring it to, before you stuck it?"

"We shore didn't," said Watt, with an eye on his two new hands. "It was dead as a mackerel when we gets to it. Its neck was broke and the bone sticking out."

They unsaddled, washed up, and got ready for supper, in spite of the feast that they had enjoyed. High was coming alive, now. All his grouch was gone. He had kept that one longer than usual, and now he was out for some fun. When they reached the house, he began talking to Stella, thinking he would make Short jealous, but for some reason Short didn't seem to be bothered about that. True, he kept a glum silence, but it was because he was still puzzling over those mysterious aces.

I been in camps, in hotels, and resteraws, in homes, and all sorts of places," High said, at the supper table, "but I ain't never saw such coffee as you make, Mrs. Watson. How do you make it? Or do Miss Stella make it?"

"I make it," snapped Mrs. Watson, "and I reck'n I make it like everybody else do. I never knowed they was but one way to make coffee. Just put water and coffee into a pot, and b'ile it."

"Maybe you are right," smiled High, "but something makes yo' coffee taste different. Maybe it's the company. And yo' bread is the lightest I ever seen." High picked up a chunk of cold bread that would have assayed about ninety per cent lead, so far as weight was concerned. "Don't tell me they ain't no difference in bread. I've et too much of the sourdough stuff that camp cooks make."

So, High ran on, and Short wondered if he would get away with it, without being shot. When the meal was over, High set into entertain Stella, just to tease Short, and Old Short went glumly off to the bunkshack. He had been gone but a little while when High followed him. Short was sitting in a chair, his elbows on his knees, staring into the fire.

"Why, Short," grinned High, "I didn't think you'd take a little thing like that so hard. I never thought you'd be jealous of yo' old partner, and—"

"You go plumb to hell," growled Short. "Did they ask you to play any poker?"

"They shore did, but I wouldn't play. I didn't want to make you no jealouser than what you are. You orto know, Short, that I wouldn't bust in and try to take yo' little Stella away from you. You saw her first, and she's yo'n, as far as I'm concerned."

"Hiram, son," said Short, dolefully, "I don't know whether you are a dang fool, a dang liar, or both, but I know you are ridin' me, and I don't blame you. What I got to tell you is, that yellow-haired cow of a Stella Watson is a card shark and a thief, and—"

"Hold on, Short," said High, in apparent soberness. "Remember, you are talking about a lady."

"Lady, hell," said Short. "No lady on earth ever found as many aces as what she can find, in one friendly game of poker. I sits in there yesterday with six dollars, and now I got fifty cents. I admits that I was soft on her from the first, but that sorty puts a damper on my ardor, and things thataway. I can't stand a cheater."

"Aw, hell, Short," grinned High. "You have lost money to men plenty of times, and you didn't talk about 'em like that."

"I know it," said Short, "but— She —she abused my confidence in her. I thought she was on the level, and was just about in love with her, so I didn't watch her, like I would have watched ary man I ever plays with."

"Well," said High, "if you are quits with her, I'll go back to the house. I'm beginning to like her a whole lot, and—"

"Get back in that chair, you dang fool," grated Short. "If I got to take

care of you, I can do it. I tell you that woman is a card shark, and I'll bet you this last fifty cents I got agin yo' promise, that she's tough as hell. The whole damn layout is on the skin. I never seen—"

"Any crisp brown biscuits, rich creamy milk, and golden butter," jeered High.

"Don't, Hiram," begged Short. "I was a dang fool, and I admit it. What more do you want? Let's take our saddle-rolls, slip our braunks out, and ride from here, while we are full of beef. We can go two-three days without eating again, and by that time—"

"I been thinking about that," said High, thoughtfully, "but they's one thing that you forgot. We homicides a couple of gents today, and they's four more, at least, in the gang. They might be a hundred. The only way we know to get out of here is to go back through Lone Pine. I been joking you some, Short, but I ain't half as happy as I been plenty of times."

"I hadn't thought of that, Hiram," mourned Short. "Looks like we are hedged in by disaster, no matter which way we look or jump. We just naturally— Listen!"

There was the sound of horsemen approaching the place, and a moment later some one hailed the house. He was replied to by a woman's voice, and there was no mistaking whose voice it was. There was not another voice in the world just like the peculiar alto voice of Stella Watson, as she sang out:

"Well, who the hell are you, and what do you want?"

"I reck'n you heared that," growled Short. "She don't talk like no lady I ever hears."

"Shut up, and listen," said High.

"You know damn well who I am," came the man's voice again.

"Oh, it's Sam Hodnett," jeered Stella.

"There's hell again, as the old woman said when she broke the gourd-handle," whispered High.

The conversation between Stella and the man at the gate went on. Stella standing on the porch, and the man sitting in his saddle.

"Yes, I'm Sam Hodnett, and these other gents are Joe and Jim and Tex. We are here on business.

"Oh, you are?" jeered Stella. "I didn't know you ever had any business except killing and stealing, and maybe getting drunk once in a while. You killed the last four men we had."

"Short," whispered High, as they crouched in the bunkhouse, "did you hear that? No wonder them gents didn't take their boots and chaps and things. They was going to heaven, where they wouldn't need 'em."

"Keep still, and listen," growled Short.

"Yes," roared Sam Hodnett. "We kilt them fellers, because they wouldn't obey orders and stay off'n our range."

"Your range," sneered Stella. "Why, damn your lousy, ornery soul. Do you you think you own the earth? You didn't kill the two that drives the upper valley this morning, did you?"

CHAPTER IV

PLUMB SKEERED

"Hiram," said Short, "listen to that. I told you she weren't no lady."

"Maybe not," replied High, "but she ain't afraid to talk to them gents. That's more nerve than I got. I'm skeered dang nigh to death, and they ain't said a word to me yet."

"No, we didn't," roared Sam Hodnett. "They bushed Montana and Kansas from a thicket, and we aim to settle that with them. Where's yo' Pap?"

"He's in the house," replied Stella. "Do you want him to come out here, so you can kill him? If you do, I'll tell him, so he can come a smokin'."

"We don't want no trouble with Watt," declared Sam. "All we want is them two saddle-tramps that he sends onto our range this morning.

What we want Watt to do is keep hands off until we attend to them two killers."

"All right, I'll tell him," said Stella, and she went back into the house."

"Short," said High, who had smothered out the little fire in the fireplace, and blown out the smoky lamp, "do you reck'n Watt is going to turn us over to them lace-makers?"

"Looks like it," replied Short. "If he do, we are goin' to be killed and et. The only chance we got is to run, and that ain't no chance. It ain't more than a hundred feet from here to them fellers, and they are watching like a cat watches the door to a mouse nest. They'll make lace out of us before we get ten foot from the door."

"They ain't goin' to make no fancy work out'n me," said High. "If they do, they'll make it in here. I'm skeered too bad to run, now. If they get me they'll have to come to my house."

"Hiram, son," said Short, "maybe we was a little too sudden and tempestuous with them gents this morning. Maybe they was just bluffing, like a feller does sometimes."

"Bluffing, hell," said High. "When a gent drags his smoke iron, and makes motions at me, he's done quit being friendly and humorous. If we hadn't took them movements for dead earnest, we'd be trying to learn to flap our wings, right now. You heard Sam Hodnett say we bushed Montana and Kansas."

"Yes, I heard him," growled Short, "and I'll bet him this fifty cents I got left that he's a damn liar."

"Shore he is, but he don't know it. How could he know it? Them braunks couldn't talk. He knowed that they weren't nothin' that wears leather and iron that could match Montana and Kansas in a gun mess. How could he know that we was skeered so damn bad that we just ups and kills them two gents before the fight starts?"

"He couldn't, I reck'n," said Short, "But I'm skeered a damn sight worse now than I was then."

"Shore," said High. "These here is skeery times. I always was afraid of boogers in the dark. I've changed my mind about being skeered too bad to run. My laigs is wigglin' now, and I feel like I'm just about right to go somewhere. They's four of them gents. Yo' laigs is just about three times as long as mine, and you ain't got no brains to carry. If you'll outrun three of 'em, I'll outrun the other one."

"Shut up, you blamed fool," growled Short. "This ain't no time for levitousness. We can't run, I tell you. We wouldn't get ten foot from that door until we'd be lace handkerchers, or doilies, or something. We—Listen! There's Old Man Watt now. Let's see what the old devil says."

"Hi'yer, ge-hents," called Watt, from the porch. His voice jumped cogs worse when he was excited. "Wha—hot is it, Sam?"

"Plenty," snarled Sam Hodnett. "I told you not to try to work my range again, and—"

"I didn't," lied Watt. "Them two boys that was up the valley this morning are new hands, and they don't know the country very well. I told 'em to work in north a ways, and they goes clean to the head of the valley. They said they had some trouble with some of yo' boys. You can't blame that on me. If you got some personal quarrel with them two drifters, that's yo' partic'lar business."

"You know damn well it's my business," roared Sam. "Any time a pair of bushers hides up in a thicket, and pots two of my hands, without givin' 'em no chance a tall, it's apt to be my business."

"That gent is laboring under a misapprehension of the facts in the case, Hiram," growled Short.

"Yes," replied High, "and if he sticks his snout in that door he's goin' to labor some more. He—" High broke off, to listen to Watt, who said:

"Well, it ain't none of my business. Go ahead and settle it with them drifters, the first time you see 'em."

"Don't worry," snapped Sam. "We'll settle it when we see 'em, and we won't be long seein' 'em. Where are they?"

"Why, they are in the bunkhouse," said Watt.

"Well, call 'em out here."

"I—I wou—hoodn't like to do that," said Watt. "They might be asleep, and not want to be disturbed."

Stella joined the confab again, just then, and said:

"Light, gents, and go to the bunkhouse. Them two drifters is in there. One of 'em in a good poker-player. They'd admire to sit into a little game with you."

"High," growled Short, "I aim to kill that sorrel heifer."

"Why, Short, you wouln't kill a woman."

"No, I wouldn't, but if I ever ketch her with a pair of overalls and a shirt on, I'll kill her before I find out she ain't a man. I don't give a damn for them five dollars and four bits, but she ain't got no right to sick them tigers on us. If they come—"

"Hush, Short," whispered High. "I'm skeered now, until my feet is froze, and my hands sweaty. Ease that door to, and fasten it if you can. The end of our wicked career is in reach of a short arm, with no fingers. Now I lay me—"

"Shut up, you disreligious, desecratin' damn fool," snapped Short. "You are apt to be talkin' to Saint Peter in about a minute, and he won't have time to forget that."

"I'll bet you my shirt again yo'n," said High, "that if I go to heaven in this mess, some of them gents goes along with me. If they do, I aim to tell Pete that they are plumb scandalous bad boys, and will gum the deck if he lets 'em into the heavenly game. Shorely he wouldn't— Look out! Them gents is sliding off'n they braunks, for some purpose."

Hodnett and his men had dismounted, to take the bunkhouse apart, or get the two offenders against Mr. Hodnett's orders. Old Man Watt and Stella still stood on the porch.

"Sam," called Stella, "there's a couple of cats in that bunkhouse. Just call, 'kitty, kitty, kitty,' and maybe they'll come out. If you go in there in the dark, they might scratch you some, you being a stranger."

"See here, Sam," bellowed Old Man Watt, "I want you to understand that this is a personal matter between you and them two drifters, and I ain't got a thing to do with it. If you knock down a hip goin' into that bunkhouse —or coming out of it—you can't blame it on me."

"Go to hell," snarled Sam. "I'll handle this little party. Come on, boys. No gun work. I aim to take 'em whole, and hang 'em." They stopped about thirty feet from the closed door of the bunkhouse, and Sam called: "Hey, you two drifters!"

There was no reply to that, nor was there to a number of other things that Sam said, some of which were not couched in very polite language. At last he roared:

"Come out, or we'll knock the door down and take you out." He got a rise out of them that time.

"Please don't do that, Mister Booger Man," High called through the closed door. "It's dark in here, and we are sk—skeered."

"You are goin' to be skeered a damn sight worse when we get in there," roared Hodnett. "Open than door."

Hodnett and his men were watching the door and the window, which they knew, or thought they knew, were the only entrances to the shack. They had not noticed a low, rumbling noise that had occurred while they were

talking to Watt. It was nothing serious. Short had torn a railing from one of the bunks, and pushed the low chimney over with it. He was watching that opening, while High was talking through the closed door. When High finished his remarks, he sped across to where Short was, and they both slipped out through the sooty old fireplace, and stood in the open air.

"Keep yo' eyes on the back corner," said High, in a low whisper, "and I'll keep mine on the front corner. If anybody comes around here, we'll have to run. All I ask is six inches head start, and I can beat a streak of lightning from here to Texas, with the skeer I got."

There was a crash, as the door flew open, followed by stifling silence in the bunkhouse.

"Well," roared Sam Hodnett, "are you comin' out, or are we comin' in?" There was no reply to that, and Hodnett went on: "Make a light, fellers. I reck'n they're under the bunks."

One of the men struck a match, and lit the smoky old lamp. No one was in sight. The room looked orderly enough, except that one bunk was slightly disarranged. The back wall of the fireplace was still intact, so they couldn't know that the chimney was down.

"Huh," snorted Sam Hodnett. "I don't see nobody in here."

High and Short had crept together at the fireplace, and could see through a crack into the lighted room.

"Shoot to the left," whispered Short, "and I'll shoot to the right. If we don't take 'em now, they'll take us in about a minute."

They had pulled their guns, and were getting ready to let Sam Hodnett know where they were, when Sam broke out with:

"Damn Watt's sorry soul, he knowed them killers weren't in here. He's got 'em holed up in his shack. It won't do him no good. Come on. Let's go call him on it."

"Hold yo' smoke," High whispered to Short. "When they tangle with Old Man Watt, we'll have a chance to run."

Hodnett and his men clattered out of the bunkhouse, and on to the front of the house, where Hodnett roared at Watt:

"Hey, Watt! Come out here."

"What do you want, now?" called Watt, from inside the house. "I told you them drifters was in the bunkhouse, and that's all I got to do with it."

"Shore you told me that," said Hodnett. "You always was a damn liar, and now you have did it again. They ain't nobody in that bunkhouse. You got 'em holed up there in yo' den, and we are comin' in after 'em—less'n you run 'em out here where we can get 'em handy."

"I hope they don't get Watt," said Short. "I aim to kill him myself, for gettin' us into a mess like this. If our horses weren't out on the range, we could get away from here, now."

"Why, Short," chuckled High, "ain't you forgetting something?"

"What is it?" snapped Short. "I'm apt to forget I'm alive, if I don't get away from here."

"Why, you forgot that yo' star, yo' pore Little Stella is in that house, and them ravenous wolves is apt to eat her plumb up. They got big teeth, and—"

"Shut up," snarled Short, who was thoroughly angry now, and didn't care what happened to Watt and his family. "If them gents busts into where that she-outlaw is, she's apt to give 'em—"

"Some crispy brown biscuits and home made preserves," finished High, with the devils of glee dancing in his mischievous soul.

Wham! A gun roared in the house, and one of Hodnett's gang yelled an oath, and staggered from the porch. At the same instant, the door crashed open, and a woman screamed. It was Mrs. Watson, but High and Short didn't know it. She was afraid they'd break the lamp chimney.

"Come on, Hiram," said Short. "Them women may be bad, but any thing that can screech like that is a human female to me, and I don't stand by and see 'em abused."

They sprang around the little bunkhouse, and began smoking that front gallery. It was over in a jiffy. Sam Hodnett and one of his brothers had entered the house. Apparently they were not welcome. At any rate, they came out just in time to meet a hail of lead that was sweeping across the gallery. In about half as many seconds, the four were lying in the yard, dead.

"Sh—hort," gobbled Old Man Watt, "is that you and High out there makin' all that smoke?"

"We made some of it," growled Short. "Anybody hurt in there?"

"No," replied Watt. "Them fellers had just got inside, when Stella made 'em mad, and they left. Looks like you boys damn nigh ruint 'em."

"They ain't hurt much," said High. "Just sorty dead, and listless like. If you don't need us, I reck'n we'll go on back to bed. We hate to have our rest broke."

At daylight High woke up and looked out the little window. Then he sat up and called to Short, to help him look. Old Man Watt was out in the yard, carefully going through the pockets of the four dead men.

"Now's yo' chance, Short," whispered High. "The light's good enough. Go ahead and pot him."

"No, Hiram," replied Short, "I can't do it. I've got a lot to answer for, when I get to the gate, but it shan't be said that I leaves a pore widder and a weeping orphant out here in this cold, cruel, Western world, without visible means of support. You can kill him if you want to."

"I don't want to," grinned High. "I think I can hurt him worse than that."

At breakfast, High and Short knew they were eating their last mess of poison, but none of that happy household knew it. After breakfast, High and Short went to the bunkhouse, and tied up their saddle-rolls. Presently, Old Man Watt came out, and said:

"Well, boys, I reck'n we got to drag them varmints off and bury 'em."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Watson," said High, "but we ain't got time. We aim to ride some."

"Ri—hide!" said Watt, his astonishment making him gobble. "Why, I need you. You are the best hands I ever had. It was worth a lot to me to have that Hodnett gang cleaned up."

"I know it was," said High, "and we aim for you to pay us for it. A hundred dollars will be enough."

"A huh—undred dollars!" gasped Watt. "Why, you ain't been here but three days, and one of them was a Sunday."

"That's what I said," snapped High. "Shell it out here, or I'm liable to remember where you was when the shootin' started!"

That same afternoon, High and Short were in Lone Pine. The place was very quiet. Its principal means of support and sustenance had been taken away with the passing of the Hodnett gang. High tried to take a drink, while the astonished Chip Ridley watched him with that cocked eye, but the stuff was too bad, and High gave up. The partners were mounting their horses when the barber approached them.

"Hi'yer, gents," he greeted. "Which way you riding?"

"Heading east," said High. "It's going to be too quiet in this country, for a while, for us to do any good."

"Now, I wonder what the hell he meant?" mused the barber, who stood watching until they passed over the hill and out of sight.

Far out on the trail, Old Short said:

"Hiram, if it was knowed how you got them hundred dollars, they could dang nigh put you in jail for it."

"Maybe they could," grinned High, "but I'll bet you the hundred agin yo' interest in Little Stella, that Old Man Watt don't ever tell how I got it."

The Cactus City Department

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NO NEW CHURCH FOR THIS BURG

Lack of Water Keeps Wet Christians from Cactus Co.

I guess there won't be no new church in Cactus City. The Church of The Pearly Gates was going to organize here, but now it looks like they won't. The rules for initiation into the Church of The Pearly Gates calls for "Total immersion of the convert." Meaning that people must be ducked in water clear over their heads. Hell, there ain't that much water in all of Cactus County. They tried doing it in a watering - trough, but it didn't work out. I guess we'll just have to struggle along with only two churches here.

Two-Legged Cyclone Stirs Up Citizens

You'd Run Plenty Too, If You Sat in What Lowry Did

As a point of information, that wasn't no cyclone which tore through town last Friday morning. It was Linseed Lowry, the house painter, who was cutting the breeze that way trying to cool hisself off. Somebody happened to notice that it was Linseed in the middle of the cloud of dust he stirred up, and being curious they followed him out of town. Even though Linseed was on foot, it was quite a while before the rider could overtake him and find out the wherefore of the one-man footrace with hisself. It turned out that Linseed, who is kind of clumsy, had tripped and fell over backwards and set down in a bucket of turpentine.

(Well, maybe that will be a lesson to Linseed to let people's dogs alone after this.)

STRAIGHT DOPE ON YEAR'S WEATHER

Take Your Pick; It's All Guaranteed

After considerable research and consulting with authorities on the subject, the *Gazette* is now ready to inform its readers as to what kind of weather we are going to have for the next six months. As usual, the *Gazette* has been very thorough in this here matter, so after reading the following you will know exactly what to expect.

Pop McCoy predicts a fair winter followed by an early spring. He makes his judgment on his rheumatics and his game leg.

Ol' Hardrock guesses that the winter will be severe, with a drought in a late spring. He can tell this, he says, by the creaking of the timbers in his mine shaft.

From up in the Pinon Peak Country, Truman, the trapper, sends down word to expect a dry, cold winter with heavy winds and rain in a early spring. He is sure of this as the buck deer have already turned blue but their necks ain't swole up yet.

On the Reservation, Hot Pants, the medicine man, has figured out—by a method which ain't fit to print—that it will snow all winter and rain all spring.

After watching the prairie dogs digging their burrows on the southeast side of the mesquite clumps, Utah Timmons is anticipating a long dry winter with terrible hot winds, with Santy Annas tearing up things in the spring.

So there is the complete dope, guaranteed correct — if you pick out the right ones. If the weather don't turn out exactly like the *Gazette* predicts, then yours truly, the editor, will straddle a unbroke horse, wearing a sprig of cholla cactus in each hip pocket.

XMAS FUN ON AS PER USUAL

Very Few People Killed But Everybody Is Happy Anyway

The Christmas Pageant, which was put on by the kids and Teachers of the Cactus City School, plus a few miscellaneous citizens, was a very entertaining show. It was supposed to be a sort of serious affair, but also there turned out to be some fun which wasn't on the regular program. Like in the scene of the Three Wise Men. The Wise Men was kids with blankets wropped around them, and the camels they rode was jackasses with sacks of straw tied onto them for humps. It was a very touching scene until one of the jacks turned his back to the audience and did what no well brought-up jackass would have done right out in public that way. Then another of the animals balked right in the middle of the stage. For a while it looked like the show was going to be held up permanent, but finally Rio Rinker got up on the stage and assisted things along by putting a lighted cigar to the jack's hindquarters. That got the animal off'n the stage all right, and the show continued just as soon as Rio was picked out of the bass drum, where he landed after the burro had kicked him.

There also was a slight delay in the proceedings when a argument broke out among the spectators. The fighting didn't last long, however, as very few gents was packing a gun to such a social entertainment. As soon as the dead and wounded had been carried out, the show went on.

I guess that's about all that was interesting about the pageant, except maybe the fire. Some careless gent dropped a lighted cigar and after everybody had left the schoolhouse burnt down.

Dude Ties Fast and Ropes Steer—Dude Ain't Seen Since

If any gent finds a horse, a steer and a dude running around the landscape, will the finder please return same to the Six-point Shooting Star and Crescent Dude Ranch. They all three are tied up together with a reata, which predicament is the result of the dude trying to learn how to rope from Tex Toomey.

Of all the riders on the SPSS&CDR this dude made the mistake of picking out Tex for roping lessons. Texans are famous for being able to think of only one, if any, thing at a time. When they go to dab a loop on a critter, why they tie their ropes to their saddle horns so they won't lose them. This makes for pretty sloppy roping of course, for the critter always has the full length of rope, but it is the only way which Tejanos and one-armed men can handle a rope.

Anyways, this dude has been taught Texas style; then he went out on the range to practice up a little. Instead of picking out a calf, the tenderfoot manages to get his loop on a full-growed steer, and the fun has begun. Just how the dude got hisself wrapped up too is a mystery, but he was securely pigged to the saddle. Leastwise he was when they all three of them fanned past the ranch house, neck and neck in a cloud of dust. When last seen they was headed north and a little east—sort of toward Montana.

FOR SALE—CHEAP

To any gent or female desirous of busting into the mining business, yours truly, Bronco Blynn, will sell pretty dang cheap 200 shares in the Haywire Mining and Milling Co. This stock is pretty fancy stuff, complete with a green design and a red seal onto it, very suitable for framing. I'll sell it for cash or trade for a good saddlehorse or a fair saddle— Hell, I'll even trade for a saddle blanket.

BANKER BUNCOES BANDITS EASY

Ordinary Outlaws Ain't Got No Chance Agin Licensed Kind

Probably all you folks don't know all there is to know about the Big Bank Hold-up which took place last Friday. There was considerable oh'ing and ah'ing among the citizens when the report got out that Black Bob and his gang had collected 20,000 simoleons in cash from the Cactus City National Bank. That report was true enough; the gang collected that amount exactly. But listen to this here joker:

Because the bank has been held up so many times lately, Shylock Shane, president and cashier, decided that he was plumb tired of handing out all his dinero free gratis to the bandits. So he and his assistant Peso Penner sat down and scratched their heads and figured out a scheme which would make the hold-ups satisfactory to all concerned, including theirselfs.

Now offhand, that looks impossible, but trust a banker to gyp somebody and at the same time make that somebody go away with a grin on their face figuring they was getting the best of it—which same is exactly what happened last Friday. When the gang walked into the Bank and announced that a hold-up was now in progress, Shylock took one look at the artillery which was pointed in his direction, and right away he became downright obliging. He apologized that all the gold was locked up with a time lock, but he managed to scrape up a armload of paper money. This satisfied the bandits, and they rode away plumb delighted with the day's work. But on the other hand, Shylock was plumb delighted too.

For the benefit of you folks who can't figure out why Shylock was so delighted to see a gang of bandits ride away with $20,000 of his dinero free gratis, I will explain that the money was counterfeit, which Shy-

(Continued On Next Col.)

BEG PARDON!

Deceased Wins Apology

The lynching which took place up in Cow-chip Canyon last week was a mistake. The gent who was made to look up a rope wasn't a horse-thief atall. This fact is made public in the *Gazette* so that the gent's relatives and friends will quit their grieving and not feel bad about the lynching after all. These mistakes will happen, and I hope this public apology makes everything all right.

MISSING "S" RAISES PLENTY OF "L"

With Apologies to the Deceased

Yours truly, Bronco Blynn, wishes to take this opportunity to make plenty and copious apologies for a error which appeared in the last issue of the *Gazette*. The slight mistake was in the line which read: "Mrs. Grizzly Greer and Mr. Cinco Smith are occupying a suite at the Grand Hotel in Yuma."

Now, folks, that ain't hardly right. I mean the spelling ain't hardly right. It was MRS. Smith, Cinco's wife, not himself, who was with Mrs. Greer in Yuma. It's too bad this error wasn't explained sooner, because probably it would have saved Cinco from getting plugged between the eyes by Grizzly Greer.

However, these little mistakes is bound to happen, and the *Gazette* sent a right handsome wreath to Cinco's funeral.

(Continued From 2nd Col.)

lock had printed especially for bank bandits.

That ought to be a lesson to you folks who has any occasion to do business with bankers. Any time you walk out of a bank with a grin on your face and plumb delighted because you have made a deal with the odds in your favor, why you better had start checking up because you can bet that somehow you have stuck your head in a loop. A banker never loses; that's why they are bankers.

The Wasp's blade flashed by the phantom's shoulder to bury itself deep in the thick neck of Bisbee Bob

The Lazarus Of The Range Spells Out A Death Warrant For His Killer

IN

GHOST BULLETS

By

FRED McLAUGHLIN

The Toano Kid's voice was as soft as the evening breeze that stirred his homeland pines: "Whenever you are ready, Bisbee, reach for your cannon; I'm waiting for you."

"I ain't lettin' no half-pint shrimp from Virginia make no pass at Rosita," said Bisbee Bob harshly. "I'll muss up that Sunday school mug."

"I didn't make any pass at her," Toano murmured. "Miss Rosita is a very nice lady, and it don't do her any good for you to mention her. If she don't like that stinging lizard pan of yours—"

Bisbee Bob's heavy hand went for his six-gun. Before it was out of its holster the Toano Kid's long-barreled thirty-two bore upon Bisbee's broad chest. Weapon half raised, Bob sighed, and waited. His face paled,

his close-set gray eyes were smoky with fear.

"Slow, Bisbee," said Toano gently. "I could have shot every button off your coat. How've you lived so long?"

Men had gone under tables, behind the bar, behind doors; some had flattened to the floor. The air was tense with imminent death. For the space of two breaths the tableau held, then a dark-haired, brown-eyed, red-lipped, perfumed tornado rushed between the armed men.

"Stop! Don't kill him, Bisbee. Ah—Dios!"

Rosita Perez was the loveliest thing that ever came out of Mexico. Men went to Leyden's gambling house and played faro for the privilege of feasting their eyes on Rosita, perched precariously upon the lookout's chair. And men lost, smiling, because of the heady wine of Rosita's smile.

And Bisbee Bob, six feet four and hard and sinewy, with a face like a bad dream, a voice like a band-saw, and a disposition akin to the rattlesnake, had limited the attentions of men to smiles only, for Bisbee Bob, gambler, was known to be a killer, and one not too nice in his methods. Rosita, so Bob had told the world, belonged to him.

The fear went out of his eyes, the ashen paleness out of his face. Grinning, he holstered his gun. "All right, Rosita," he said, "I won't kill him. Might git me in trouble—and you don't want me to git in trouble, do you?"

Toano smiled also. "Right nice of you, Bisbee."

Rosita put a trembling hand on Toano's arm. She smiled into his face. "If you fight with Bisbee," she said softly, it will make me ver' onhappy."

The Toano Kid was slim and lithe and graceful, with fair skin, and eyes as blue as a midnight tropical sky. He wore soft bootees, cream-colored corduroy riding breeches, white shirt, and a broad, stiff-brimmed, tan Stetson.

Shorter by a foot than Bisbee Bob, his eyes were on a level with Rosita's when he offered her a smile of almost feminine sweetness. "If I fight with Bisbee, Miss Rosita, it will be because he wants to fight."

He put away the pistol which had seemed to leap with such magical swiftness into his hand. "And I don't reckon Bisbee will want to fight. He just kinda lost his temper; he's all right."

Bisbee Bob's eyes were smouldering with hatred. "I don't need no compliments from you. Some day I'll git you on the end of a gun."

"Sure, Bisbee—but you'll need a lot of practise."

The men of Arroyito chuckled behind the broad back of Bisbee Bob, and smiled upon the Toano Kid, and noticed that the fine brown eyes of Rosita Perez lighted up when Toano came into Leyden's Ojo Blanco to get his claret lemonade, or to try his hand at faro.

And it was noticed, too, that now Avispo the Wasp followed Bisbee Bob like a shadow, that he stood at Bisbee's elbow when the gambler drank, and at his shoulder when Bisbee played stud poker, which was his game. No one had ever heard the Wasp's real name.

Avispo was small and dark and rat-faced, and he could cast a knife as swiftly and as accurately as one might throw a bullet. He was Bisbee Bob's creature, for Bisbee had caught the Wasp in the act of murder, and he had held that information over the little Mexican like the sword of Damocles.

They met often—Bisbee Bob and the Toano Kid—on the street, in the Ojo Blanco, and passed the time of day. Bisbee's eyes talked murder, but there was only good-natured raillery in the steady blue eyes of the Toano Kid, safe behind a lightning draw.

Each paid his court to Rosita in his

own way; Bisbee Bob heavy, possessive, scowling; the Kid with a smile and a word or two in Spanish as he riffled his stack of chips and watched the facile fingers of Tony Lamar manipulate the boxed deck.

That Rosita had fallen for Toano was evident to anyone with eyes and human intelligence. That she was afraid of Bisbee Bob was equally evident. That her fear of Bob was for the safety of the handsome, blue-eyed Kid was something only Rosita knew.

The break came one crisp September night when the Ojo Blanco was comfortably filled. Stakes in the stud game had skyrocketed, pinching out all the players save three—a house man, Bisbee Bob, and the Toano Kid.

Bisbee won, and continued to win. The house man, whose losses meant nothing to him, for, win or lose, he drew his salary from Leyden, growled because he hated to lose. The Toano Kid lost as he always lost or won, in silence and in the best of grace.

Men felt the tension, left games or the bar and gathered around. Rosita deserted her post as faro lookout and slipped into a vacant chair beside Toano. She said no word, she studied the cards that fell, face up, in silence, and she watched—fear in her dark eyes—as Bisbee Bob dragged in stacks of vari-colored chips.

Bisbee's laugh was free, and his voice was loud as he raked in his winnings after a lucky fifth card draw on his own deal. "The last card weighs a ton!" he said.

"It's a very important card," murmured the Toano Kid.

During his next deal Bisbee drew a third queen on the last card and beat Toano's aces back to back. Toano dropped his slim sensitive hands to the arms of his chair. His mouth was smiling, but his blue eyes were hard. "Funny thing about that last queen, Bisbee," he said gently, "that queen of spades."

Bisbee Bob recognized the danger signal. He let his right hand fall to his lap, slipped his belt around to bring the holstered gun toward the front. "Whut about it?"

"You reckon there's two spade queens in that deck?"

"Of course not . . . whut's on yore mind?"

"Whenever I cut the cards for a man I don't trust I always look at the bottom card."

"That's crooked," said Bisbee Bob.

"Yeah, I know it," Toano agreed, "But it sometimes gives you a pointer."

"Well?" Bisbee's face went brick-red. "I say—well?"

Toano's steady blue eyes never left Bisbee's face. "That bottom card," he said slowly, "was the queen of spades."

In the long painful silence that followed this challenge the crowd behind the Toano Kid parted, allowing a wide bullet lane. Back of Bisbee was the closed window. No one seemed to notice that Avispo the Wasp was not at his accustomed place at the gambler's shoulder.

Rosita spoke in a gasping whisper: "Dios—no!"

Right hand at his belt, Bisbee came slowly, cautiously, to his feet. He towered over the table, his powerful body was tensed, his close-set gray eyes were gleaming, his heavy lips drew back from yellowed teeth. His voice was like the hiss of a rattler: "Maybe you think I dragged that queen from the bottom—huh?"

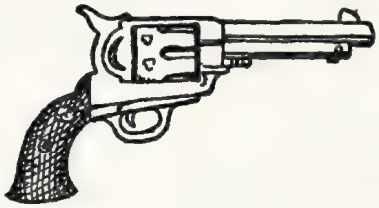
"That queen," said Toano, who hadn't moved out of his chair, and who seemed to be as cool and unconcerned as though he had been ordering a claret lemonade, "didn't work clear through the deck. That's no way for a queen to act."

"No," whispered Rosita, "no, Toano!"

A man in the crowd coughed nervously, another said, "Hush!" in a harsh, sibilant whisper.

After a long moment Bisbee Bob rasped an oath. His pistol hand came up in a flash of silver. A fraction of a second before he fired, however, the Toano Kid's long-barreled gun flamed once. The Kid never took but one shot.

The pistol dropped from Toano's hand, his hand dropped to the chair arm. He sat, head against the chair back, his wide blue eyes staring at Bisbee Bob. A splotch of crimson formed on the white shirt above his heart, formed and spread swiftly.



"Gawd!" said Bob, holstering his gun and easing his long body to the chair. "He's dead—and he's lookin' right at me!"

Rosita cried out once. She put her head on her outflung arms, her dark curls cascaded over the green-topped table.

"Somebody close his eyes," said Bisbee hoarsely. "Quick! I can't stand it!"

They lifted the Kid's limp, frail figure and laid it gently on the twenty-one table. Deputy sheriff Len Masterson held Toano's wrist for a minute, but found no pulse. He opened the white, blood-bathed shirt. He shook his head. "Right through the heart . . . the Kid's deader'n Columbus."

"Close his eyes, Len," whispered Bisbee Bob plaintively. "If he's dead he—he don't need his eyes open."

"I—I *can't*," said Masterson. "Doc Pumphrey will be here soon . . . he can do it." The deputy studied Bisbee Bob. "Where is Avispo, Bisbee? Where is that pizen body-guard of yours?"

"I dunno, Len," said the gambler darkly. "I don't need no one to do my fightin' for me."

"Humph . . . and Toano missed you, eh, Bisbee?"

Bob nodded. "Yes, he missed me; he wasn't so good."

"That's queer. The Kid wasn't the kind that missed. And you as big as a horse—and less'n six feet from him. Let's see his gun."

Some one picked up Toano's pistol and brought it to the deputy. He swung the cylinder out and shook the cartridges into the palm of his hand. There was one shot shell, still redolent of burned powder, and four good cartridges; five in all. Although the West carried guns that shot six times, the hammer usually rested on an empty chamber.

"Everything's all right here," Len Masterson announced. "Let's see where Toano's bullet went."

The window behind the chair in which Bisbee Bob had sat was closed, and no punctured or broken glass indicated the course of the Kid's bullet. The table showed no mark, the chair, the wall, the window frame—all were free of bullet holes.

The deputy took off his wide-brimmed hat and scratched a grizzled head. "Strange, I call it. Bisbee, you right sure you ain't got a slug somewhere in your carcass?"

"Sure I ain't . . . wouldn't I know?"

"Most amazing. The Kid missed the whole world and you too."

"Reckon so," said Bisbee, trying to smile, but with scant success. "Wish somebody'd close Toano's eyes. I—I can feel him lookin' right at me."

It was raining on the night that the ghost of the Toano Kid rode into Arroyito, one of the three or four rains Arroyito usually had in a year.

A stiff-brimmed, tan Stetson hat shaded the ghost's face, and a yellow pommel slicker several sizes too large shielded him from the rain.

He dismounted and knocked on the door of the adobe shack that Avispo the Wasp occupied with the lean wrinkled deaf and half-blind woman who was supposed to be his mother.

The Wasp opened the door, the ghost whispered the name, "Avispo,"

and slipped in. Avispo lit the lamp and turned to his visitor, who had removed the slicker and pushed the Stetson back upon his head.

Avispo looked, gasped. His dark face went gray-green with terror, his hands beat the air futilely, his mouth opened and closed, opened and closed, but no sound came forth.

He saw a slim lithe figure, a fair complexioned, handsome face, and eyes as blue as a midnight tropical sky. On the white shirt front over the heart was a crimson smear.

"Madre de Dios!" Avispo cried at last, his voice a shrill, despairing wail. Trembling, he went to his knees. "A—*a sambre!*" He crossed himself: "I—I saw you buried a month ago!"

"I did not stay buried," said the ghost in a hollow whisper. "I have come back. I know what you have done—what you and Bisbee Bob have done. I have come for the payment."

Avispo groveled in abject and paralyzing fear. "He—he made me do it—the big Bisbee Bob."

"Tell me."

Avispo talked swiftly, brokenly, as though anxious to appease the spirit of the dead Virginian: "I—I took one bullet from the pistol of—of Toano, one bullet from the first cartridge in the cylinder. Only the bullet—the powder remained. To do this I slipped into his room at the Hotel Zaragosa. I knew he would shoot only once, for he was not one to miss."

"And you did this for Bisbee Bob . . . did he pay you?"

"Ah—no!" Avispo's words came rushing: "He never pays me. Once I do a wrong thing—Bisbee finds it out. For him to keep quiet I have to do what he says. Dios—how will I find absolution?"

"You won't," said the ghost, still in that hollow whisper. He drew from a fancifully stamped leather holster at his belt a small short-barreled pistol and held it awkwardly in his right hand.

"O-o-oh! All my life I will be good . . . I will pray. Don't kill me, I am not ready to die!"

"And Rosita . . . tell me about Rosita."

"She has gone. After he—after Toano is killed she returned to Mexico. Bisbee Bob followed her, but he comes back without Rosita. She is love the—the Toano Kid."

"Then Bisbee Bob—?"

"All the time he is at the Señor Leyden's Ojo Blanco, the gambling house. Bisbee Bob is not a good gambler any more. He drinks too much, he is afraid, his hands shake, and his eyes roll, he looks behind him. All the time he says to me: 'Avispo, I see his eyes . . . he is dead, Avispo—but his eyes stare at me, always his eyes stare at me. Toano is dead, but he watches me—out of those blue eyes of his that are never closed. At night I can not sleep, because he is there, watching. When I do sleep I dream of him. Through the day I must look beside me, behind me—everywhere! He will come, and I will have to kill him again—or he will kill me.' That is what Bisbee Bob says to me. And men laugh at Bisbee Bob for a coward. Some said he murdered Toano, because no bullet was found, no bullet from—from Toano's gun. I have told all. If you—if you won't kill me—"

"I won't kill you . . . Stay here."

Free of the menacing gun, and of the ghostly presence, Avispo the Wasp lost much of his fear. He may have been a murderer, but he was no fool. He began to think.

Why should a spirit whisper, why should a spirit ride a horse, why should he have to carry a pistol, and why should the spirit of the Toano Kid not carry the same gun that Toano carried? Why should a spirit hold the weapon so awkwardly, when Toano held one so well?

Avispo laughed. It wasn't a spirit, not a *sambre*. It was just a man—a man now in possession of information

that rendered him dangerous to Avispo and to Bisbee Bob.

The Wasp put on his hat, a leather jacket against the rain; he slipped the long, needle-pointed knife into his belt. Others might use guns . . . the swift, sure, and silent knife for him.

He went out, shut the door behind him, bent his head to the rain and ran as fast as his thin legs would carry him. Scarce a hundred feet away, he saw the front door of the Ojo Blanco swing open, saw pale beams of light lance the slanting rain, saw the yellow-garbed apparition pass the portal.

The air of the Ojo Blanco was hazy with tobacco smoke, it was heavy with the smell of liquor, and it was quick with the din of clinking glasses, of rattling chips, of shuffling feet, and the mingled sounds of voices.

Bisbee Bob's tall sinewy body slouched over the bar. The half-filled glass of whisky shook in his trembling hand. His long horse-face was a mottled green and red from the constant terror that had possessed his soul, and his small, close-set, bloodshot eyes wavered from walls to ceiling, from windows to doors, from man to man, furtive, searching, fear-laden.

The front door of the Ojo Blanco opened, and a slickered figure came in with a blast of wind and rush of rain. The door swung shut again.

Bisbee Bob turned to face the new arrival, who had stopped and stood half way between Bisbee and the door. The gambler saw a tan Stetson, a yellow slicker that reached nearly to the sanded floor and was long enough in the sleeves to cover the hands.

Bisbee offered a grin that was half a snarl. "Come on out of yore tent, Peewee," he said, "and have a drink on me."

The newcomer shrugged clear of the all-enveloping slicker, pushed back the stiff-brimmed hat, and stood revealed.

Small, slim, lithe, graceful, soft bootees, cream colored corduroy riding breeches, a white shirt that showed a suggestive smear of crimson over the heart, a fair-complexioned handsome face; wide-set eyes, clear and steady, and as blue as a midnight tropical sky. In the loosely-swinging right hand was a gleaming pistol.

The figure stood silent, expectant, waiting. The unwavering blue eyes lanced the face of Bisbee Bob.

"Gawd!" said some one hoarsely, "Gawd!"

The door opened and closed, and Avispo the Wasp stood with his back against it. His dexterous, ready hand was at his belt, where rested the long, needle-pointed knife.

Nobody noticed him, nobody noticed anyone save that poised, intent figure that was the incarnation of the Toano Kid, dead and buried a month.

Bisbee Bob's whisky glass crashed to the floor. He brushed a heavy, shaking hand across his eyes that seemed to focus with difficulty. Gradually the familiar, fearsome figure came out of the fog of liquor that veiled the gambler's vision.

"The Kid," he said haltingly, the—the Toano Kid!"

The Kid said nothing. He merely offered that stabbing, challenging stare from blue, wide-set eyes.

"Them—them eyes!" rasped Bisbee Bob. "Somebody close his eyes!"

But no one moved, except to clear a bullet lane behind the gambler.

Bisbee reached for his six-gun, fumbled with fingers half paralyzed. "Gawd," he gasped, "I—I can't!"

The figure of the Toano Kid raised a right hand, bearing the pistol. It was a slow, deliberate, dreamy movement, as though time would wait forever.

The gambler's gun hand came up at last. He aimed wildly—eyes tightly closed—and fired.

In that instant Avispo the Wasp went into action. His right arm flexed and straightened again in a

lightning gesture. The gleaming knife whistled through the air.

For the first time in his life the Wasp missed his target. The blade flashed past Toano's shoulder and buried itself hilt deep in the thick neck of Bisbee Bob.

Bisbee choked, gasped, reached for the bar and failed to find it in the sudden darkness that overwhelmed him. He crashed, face down, to the sanded floor and lay grotesquely flat and still.

The figure of the Toano Kid swayed uncertainly, leaned passively against the bar. The pistol dropped with a loud clatter in the strained silence, the broad-brimmed Stetson hat fell off, and a wealth of golden curls tumbled about the Kid's ears.

"Goshamighty," gasped the bartender. "A skirt!"

With one supporting hand on the bar rail, she faced the circle of curious, silent men. She spoke slowly, brokenly, her voice barely audible: "Lester Templeton, the—the Toano Kid, was my twin brother. He was murdered. Avispo, the—the Mexican, took a bullet out of my brother's pistol, and he—" she indicated the prone figure of Bisbee Bob with a slight inclination of her head, "he murdered him."

Leyden—big, blond, and good-natured—pushed through the crowd.

"We're right sorry," he said gently, "about Toano, ma'am; he was a nice kid—and the fastest draw in the county. We'll take care of the Wasp. He's a no-good Mex—oughta been strung up long ago. What I can't understand, Ma'am, is this: Whyinell didn't you plug Bob when you had the chance?"

"I—I couldn't," said the sister of the Toano Kid. "I have never fired a gun of any kind in all my life."

THE RAMIREZ ROCKS

by

Bill Adams

WHERE down by the Ramirez falls the snow, and never a keel goes by,
Where down by the Ramirez great winds blow and the wild sea pigeons fly,
Where down by the Ramirez, lone and grim, where the curling gray-backs sweep,
And the herds of the big sea elephant swim, and the hunting killers leap;
Down by the Ramirez, east and south of the dark Horn's murderous shape,
When the winds fall low and the snow clouds clear, the sea ghosts take their shape.
Up from the weedy deeps they rise, their white sails stretched o'erhead,
And bright again are the long drowned eyes of the lost ship's sailor dead;
And loud again do their chanteys ring in the midnight's solemn space,
While swift they race, close wing and wing, as they did in the bygone days.
There be ships of the swift Australian fleet, their wide holds crammed with wool;
There be ships bound out for Oregon, the pride of Liverpool;
There be Yankee ships, and Dago ships, and ships of the Welshman's way,
And the French ship hails to the Antwerp ship and bids her yield the way.
There be Scotch ships builded by the Clyde, and ships of Italy,
And the ships of the great saltpeter fleet outbound from Germany.
A thousand widows weep ashore, and the hosts of the children mourn
Those sea ghosts risen from the grave south eastward from the Horn.
A space is theirs, a respite brief, betwixt the southern gales,
To man their willing wheels again, and trim their eager sails,
To race once more along the sea, with cheering and with song,
Where grim the dark Ramirez rise the sullen seas among.
"We've won!" They said, "The Horn is beat! We've tricked the berg and gale!
Pile on the canvas now, and drive! Heap on her tiers of sail!"
Aye, happy so, with peril past, they sped those southern seas
Till questing keel and straining mast met the grim Ramirez.
The waiting murderous Ramirez, the Horn's iron gates that guard,
Stand watching now o'er empty seas, as stones in a graveyard.

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MULESKINS

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Author of "Chips of Stone," "No Trespass Trapping," etc.

BURR KANE rode into the Slicker Trading Post driving two loaded packhorses westward toward the Windfalls Mountains. Luck was with him, apparently, for he found that the trappers of the range were nearly all at the old ranch settlement, talking things over in Gunlock Burney's repair shop, figuring things out for the winter fur campaign, and they knew from the make of the loads that the newcomer was good. Shrewdly they noted his 160 pounds weight, trim figure, hard-drawn features and straight-looking gray eyes.

"I'm looking for open trapping country," he said. "I heard that the Windfalls wasn't all taken up."

"Plenty of room, more country than fur," Gunlock spoke for the boys. "It's a long ways back. Nobody's been working up Cloudy Creek Basin for quite a while. Some claims there are reasons. Others say that's just a notion."

Trappers Stick Together—Even "Wild Horses" Can't Pull Them Apart

"On the Geological Forest Folio seems like Cloudy Creek'd be the nearest and easiest country," Kane remarked. "What's the matter of it?"

"Nothing the matter of the country," Gunlock said, while the boys around sat around, listening with deceptive lack of attention. "The boys jes' don't hanker for it. Moneta Shade, here, has his lines up t' the south end, Blue Holt and Caspar Joe, these boys, are over north. You're a trapper—you know when boys get to know their country, have their camps built, they don't move around much outside."

"It's been trapped?"

"Oh, yes, down to 'bout five years ago—good camps, but prob'ly the line trails'll need brushing out for windfalls."

"I'll sure be glad to take up country that hasn't been worked over for four or five years," Kane exclaimed. "The Park Line don't come down into the creek basin, does it?"

"Oh, no—line is

along the summit range," one of the men said. "That's about all there is to it—kinda clost to the Windfalls Park is one reason 'tain't none too popular. You see, it's kinda on the d'rect trail up over the divide."

"Oh-h—um-m—" Kane hesitated, "I reckon all theh is to it, a trapper's supposed to mind his own business as regards what's going on in the state game refuge, or whatever they call it."

"Well, yes—'course——" one of the others assented. "You might put on blinders an' kinda don't see any too far ahead of you, neither."

There was a short, wry chuckle around the group. They sat in a sort of glum, thoughtful silence as they stared at the floor. Some of them rolled their eyes and gazed at the newcomer, watching from under the brims of their hats, but Kane was unfolding the topographical survey sheet which he had cut into rectangles and pasted to fold on cheesecloth. The map showed the timber country in green, and the altitude in brown lines, streams and lakes in blue, and red boundary lines marked the state park area.

Then the men drew up around the map and began to tell the stranger the features. They could tell about where the old Cloudy Creek trap line had been run, and one of them could tell about where the line cabins had been built long ago. The last occupant, Tan Vandick, had made some changes but he had pulled his freight five years ago and since then Cloudy Creek was known as hard luck country.

"The only trouble you'll likely have," Gunlock said, "is in your otter sets. Beaver run all over, and if you catch a beaver they catch you—up to two years in the pen an' a thousand fine. If they catch you, maybe they give you a timber-belt slave job."

"A slave job?" Kane exclaimed, "I don't just get you. I never trapped in these timberbelts before. I've worked in Bad Lands, Green timber in Minnesota; one year in the way-back bush of Canada. I don't aim to make any mistakes. I know how beaver'll get into otter spring brook sets, of course. They even come around otter slides. I'd hate to get into trouble on account of otter sets. I don't see—what's a slave job, anyhow?"

"Well, yo' know'f yo' hold up a stage on a road, an' you're caught maybe they put you to repairing that road," one of the boys said. "An' if you do a fur-law violation back in the green timber, maybe they'll handle you easy—an' give you a muleskin proposition. If you catch a beaver, likely you'll have to trap ten or twenty just so's to make yo' sick of havin' vi'lated once."

"Muleskin proposition?" Kane frowned, "I don't get that——"

"Muleskins are illegal beaverskins is all he means," Gunlock explained. "It's just one of those ways of saying things that get to passing around, sometimes."

"I see——" the trapper from outside said thoughtfully. "You say you have to trap ten or twenty more beaver—and it's against the law to trap one? What are you giving me—a rigging?"

The men sitting around did not answer. Perhaps they had said too much. Gunlock, even, hesitated to speak on the subject, but finally he braced himself as if his remarks took a real effort.

"That's the fact," Gunlock said. "That country is away back, and mostly you must handle your own propositions. If you are caught with a beaver, even if it's an accident in an otter set—well, you know there are two kinds of game wardens—State and fifty-fifty reward seekers. And then there's another kind—they get the muleskin on a man and make him keep on trapping illegal furs or go to the pen for what he done by accident. Course, the more he traps, the tighter they got him. That makes him a slave trapper."

THE big time trappers rode out from the Slicker Trading Post three days later. On their maps colored pencil lines gave each his trapping country. Burr Kane was to have Cloudy Creek Basin, due west, the portal a deep canyon through a wild,

forested ridge. The inner fastnesses of the Windfalls loomed in waves of granite, cliffs of vast height and dark timber belts. Blue Jack Holt and Caspar Joe turned off along the pied-mountain roadway to the north and south ends of the great range. Moneta Shade and Steel Cammon kept on to Red Brier Fork, through the canyon, accompanying Kane to the main cabin which Tan Vandick had built for his line at the foot of the Cloudy Creek Basin and abandoned five years before.

They found the peeled spruce, pine-shingled cabin in good condition. The common utensils were in place with staple supplies protected in jars and metal against squirrels, mice and porcupines. Blankets and robes were slung in netting bags made of chicken fence and mosquito bar.

In the morning they headed into their own countries. Shade went north to Cabin Creek, Cammon south to Horsethief Canyons, driving packed burros, while Burr Kane headed a burro up Cloudy Creek, prospecting the vast and beautiful land.

Kane had gone nearly three miles when Moneta Shade suddenly appeared ahead of him in a long, narrow, grassy glade. He had his rifle over his shoulder and obviously he had left his pack animals over the creek divide in Cabin Valley. Kane, wondering, kept on to the trapper, a dark, stocky, rather stolid figure.

"Howdy—forget something?" Kane greeted, smiling and looking with keen gray eyes.

"No, that's just it—I didn't," Shade said, hesitating. "You're a stranger in this country. I don't reckon yo' got any idee what you're up against. Course, 'tain't none of my business."

"The fur isn't plenty, but I'll make expenses," Kane replied. "I saw two dark mink down the line—and otter sign. I know weather, too."

Tain't that," Shade twisted uneasily. "I'd get killed, myse'f, if any one knowed I fair-warned you. I'm serious. Yo' life ain't worth a penny. You ain't fooled everybody, and yo'r bein' so innocent 'bout muleskins is sho' suspicious. I'm kinda new in this country—but I know what *you're* up against."

"You'd despise me if I turned back, Shade," Kane said flatly.

"Not knowing what I do, I wouldn't." The trapper shook his head.

"Old man, just why did you let me know —what you think you know?"

Shade took off his hat, wiping sweat from his brow on his sleeve, glancing uneasily into the edges of the tall timber.

"I sure despise the scoundrels you're after," he said. "I know yo' ain't turnin' back. I know yo're good. I'm tellin' yo'— I want yo' to believe me. I don't believe in crooked trapping——"

"If I stay you'd have to be my enemy?" Kane asked.

"Why no, not between us, I won't," Shade hesitated. "Likely, though, I'd talk dif'rent around. If you kill somebody— don't brag it. They won't if they tuck you back in under a lot—they'll forget, too."

"I'll have to watch out for Cammon— Bluejack——"

"No, not any of us," Shade denied. *Trappers* stick together——"

"Reckon I get you," Kane said. "I'm staying, old man. I'd like to trap this country. How can I manage it? You know how a man is. I can't pull my freight."

Shade chuckled. "The hell of it is, don't you see, you're *square,*" he said. "You jes' gotta keep *that* secret."

"Oh, they haven't anything on me," Kane grinned. "That being so, I'd like to stay here without being a damned fool doing it. What is the real proposition, Shade?"

"If yo're staying—well, it's *muleskins.*"

"Ah—wild horses, eh?" Kane nodded wisely, and Shade looked at him with a queer expression, then turned on his way again with a quick, "S'long—good luck!"

The main Cloudy Creek Valley led straight up to the Windfalls Park Divide line. In the Lost Pass, the head spring of the Cloudy was less than a hundred yards from the mountain back tarn or pool

in which Pretty Water River started on its way through the natural wild museum set aside for the public, whose creatures were the great solicitude of several state departments, and in no state was a possession more precious than the wild life of Windfalls Park.

Cloud Creek Basin was beautiful. The whole of the Windfalls Mountains should have been included in the park, for it was worthless for domestic purposes, its wildlife a potential treasure. In the Pass Kane found the runway used by deer, elk, bear, pekan, cougar and minor creatures crossing the range. There, too, were muffled hoof tracks of pack animals of raiding outlaw trappers going into the forbidden area.

Kane found hidden in the wilderness the five cabins which Vandick had built on his line. These with the main camp at Red Brier Fork comprised the stops. The trapper in laying out the Cloudy Creek fur domain had shown how good he was. His trap cubbies at every fur runway were of stone; his landmarks, his caches, the country remained intact. Until Kane came to the north end he found everything exactly as Vandick had left it.

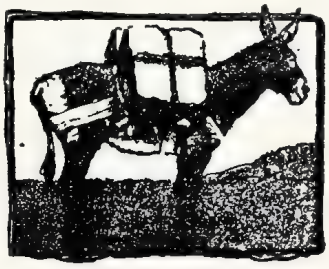
THE North End camp was a dry cave with a cribbed peeled spruce wall half-cabin front, the fireplace at the side. The site was on a bench, almost like a ledge and hidden in a cluster of dense, stunted spruces. Hundreds of square miles of the Cloudy and Cabin Creek basins were visible from the bluff. The trap line followed the foot of the slope through miles of lodgepole pines.

The moment Kane entered the cave he sniffed musk, and beyond the canvas-tarp partition was a nearly quarter sphere-shaped cave in which he found the answer. Dozens of dry castors, perfume stock worth dollars an ounce hung revealed by his flashlight. The discovery gave Kane pause, for it was ominous. That stuff wasn't there by accident.

"I'll stay with it," he decided before sleeping that night. "Perhaps this is the break I'm looking for. They've got me for beaver-possession before I've run a trap. That ought to please the fifty-fifty fine splitters."

When Kane arrived at Red Brier Forks again, his prospecting had uncovered all the cached traps. He had distributed them at the sets which Vandick had used, cut new well-sweep poles and forks, and baited the places where cubbies were used. Mindful of the warning that he make his otter sets where illicit beaver would not spring the steel jaws, he needed all his wildcraft knowledge coupled with skill.

The line route was the best possible, the grades long and easy, the range traversed with the minimum of climbing, scaling and scrambling. Vandick had gone five miles



around rather than risk a slide rock and he had kept down from wind-swept summits in timber. To a stranger the land seemed at first to be just a terrific tumult of stone and tangle of dense forest, but the trail opened pretty routes through it.

Vandick had played wolf, having a wind-swept open between each hidden cabin and the trap trail. Kane had to laugh, for at the side-jumps ten or fifteen minutes of wintry gale covered footprints in the snow and only in a rare calm the ruse might be discovered. Instead of driving his pack animals to the camps, Kane left them down on the line, carrying their burdens on his own back to the cabins which were hidden off-side in ravine and cluster. Thus one following the hoofprints would find none of the shelters. The new claimant hung up deer at each camp for winter meat, cut wood and made all snug.

THE first big snow that looked as if it would stay caught Burr Kane going his first round on foot after having made his sets. The blizzard had held off till late November. When he came to the North End camp he had more than $160 worth of fur on stretchers behind him, and forty-five dollars more to pull onto hardwood boards that Vandick had left, beautifully long, narrow, smooth cut, in each camp.

Kane carried an ash-splint pack on shoulder straps and a pair of light caribou string snowshoes prepared for this storm. Later he would have to wear big ones in the loose fluff until wind and sun packed a good crust.

When he headed into the dwarf spruces that hid the camp the short day had faded, the blizzard wind was sweeping through the bristling twigs of the forest canopy, but only drafts of chill zephyrs, thick with falling needles of fine snow struck along the ground slope.

The cabin was dark. He stumbled to the door and dropped his pack onto the washbench, whistling with relief and leaned a moment against the door jamb as he pulled the rawhide latchstring and shoved the door open. Dragging his feet, he reached the hearth and drew shavings, kindlings, small sticks from the pile always left so that when he came dead tired, he could make a fire though he had to crawl to the place. Unscrewing his matchbox, he fumbled a moment, thumbed a head and thrust the flame into shaved pine knot stuff. Sitting like a bullfrog, he watched his fire grow.

Presently the light chunks caught and he heaved on a pine stump, squirming back as the heat increased. Snow had melted on his face and some on his shoulders began to steam. He pulled off his shirt as he knelt, and rising to his feet took down a dry woollen shirt with red and black inch squares to put it on. Then he stiffened, sniffed and turned to look around for the first time. He had caught a whiff of cigarette smoke.

"Looks like you've had quite a pull," one of two men remarked.

"Why—ah——" Kane took their measure, "I reckon."

GRINS died from their faces. A big, chesty, square-faced man sat beside a tall, gangling, slimly built companion on the table bench, their automatic pistols in their hands. Both were *good,* capable, ready citizens. They wore gray riding breeches, gray shirts and stiff brimmed, low-crowned, peaked gray hats. Laced moccasin boots, wide, brown belts, empty holsters were also alike. Well they might be ready for trouble in that camp redolent of fifty pounds or so of castor musk, illicit perfume stock.

"Looks like I got visitors," Kane said.

"Sure do," one said cheerfully.

"If you don't mind, I'll light a lamp and get supper," Kane said.

"Suits us," the lank man said, "We'd had it ready only we kinda thought you might be coming through. We'll help. You better lay aside that meat-pop of your'n—if it's all the same to you."

Kane unbuckled his British officer's belt, and with the .22-auto' dangling low carried it to the table. One of the men drew the clip and emptied the chamber, and also unloaded Kane's rifle.

"Nothing but twenty-twos?" one asked, puzzled.

"I'm trapping," Kane answered, "a big gun banging scares foxes, the cats, and anything else for that matter. If I was hunting it'd be different."

"Don't you use big bait?" the stockier man asked, curiously.

"I kill venison for meat—no running shots of course," Kane answered. "Personally, I use whatever fur is eating for my bait. Depend a lot on medicine—anise, rhodium, fish-oil, catnip——"

"What's that porcupine in the Cabin Creek cubbies for?" the lank man asked.

"Pekan—fisher, you know."

"They eat fisher?" the stockier man ex-

claimed, surprised, "Why, I didn't know that."

"Course, anybody in bounty hunter uniforms wouldn't know much about such things," Kane remarked. "Why should state men know anything?"

"Hi-i," the lanky intruder shouted, patting his companion on the back, "A man sure betrays his iggerance if he talks too much."

KANE grinned, but it wasn't a happy expression.

"How about it—you going to make trouble?" one asked.

"Oh, I know when I'm licked," Kane assured them.

"We'll take your word for it," and so they prepared supper. Kane brought in three big steaks of venison from his meat box, cut thick before freezing. One of the men remarked what a good idea it was cutting up ready for use before it froze.

"You sure know your stuff," the men remarked now and again, as they put on coffee, mixed flapjacks, set the table.

After supper they stretched before the fire, lying on an old grizzly bear skin and two winter horse hides. For a time there was no talk. Kane presently sat up cross-legged, the others following suit. Then the thicker-set man remarked, "Course, we're official—you know that."

"I ain't hoping anything different," Kane answered.

"Looks like a good winter, catching."

"For you, likely," Kane grunted, "Glad you feel that way."

"How 'bout those castors?" one asked after chuckling a moment.

"A lot I've got to say about them—now."

"You've had hard luck, that's all," the taller said, "Maybe no real friend sent you to this cabin. How about it?"

"Listen, old man, don't talk like that about people I know," Kane said angrily. "Not especially can any damned dressed up blue-hide, samson-hair, flea-bit uniformers talk about a full prime, glossy stuff; compared to fades, shedders an' spongy summer stuff, give me clean firsts in man or beast."

"You know you're up against it, don't you?" one said, hotly.

"Hell, yes."

"Would you rather be up against it in green timber, livin' out or take a four-five year stretch inside, making big rocks small, braidin' hair for fun an' tobaccy money? We got you for two hundred beaver—now."

Kane blinked, narrowed his eyes, giving the two a sidelong glance. The men watched him.

"I don't get-cha," Kane said slowly, "I'm a stranger in this country."

"Iggerance let you into Cloudy Creek," the stocky one said, "You c'n sure trap. Maybe yo're welcome if yo're sensible."

"Then you're phoney, uniformed setups to scare somebody?" Kane jeered.

"Don't fool yourse'f," one snarled, as both reddened in the firelight, the lamp having been blown out to save oil, "My name's Chert Tuohy an' he's Sinjer Cruzan. Here's Special Deputy Bounty Hunter papers, all right. If we say the word, over the line you go. The only question is if you've got sense."

"I can't proposition you," Kane said, "Just like I said, I trap."

"Good sets, too," Tuohy said, "Yo' got 'nough musk stocked to start a perfume factory, 'sides medicine. That's a big season's work already."

"Them castors is dry," Kane said, "Caught last year or before that."

"We got you for possession," Cruzan said, "That's enough for us. Would you do the right thing, now?"

"What else could I do?"

"Now yer talkin'," Cruzan said, glancing at Tuohy, who nodded. "We ain't mean fellers. We don't care if you trap. Hell—go anywhere, catch anything, but at the same time you got a good thing here. We don't get paid much. Nobody's trapped Cloudy Creek since Vandick skinned it. You're making big money, even if you

don't know the country. It's all up to you. We just run around. We never bother to trap. We're int'rested in muleskins—spring primes. The rest is up to you—the pen or slave-trappin'."

"How about my winter take—straight stuff?" Kane asked.

"You get the idea—you're bright," Tuohy exclaimed. "You keep that. Be best if you sold it open at Slicker. Gunlock'll buy it, pay good. We don't care about that."

"But that late trapping?" Kane asked. "I'll be all through by the time muleskins are prime."

"That's just it," Tuohy grinned. "You jes' do some spare time work for us, see? You work through the spring thaw into warming up for us, or you go to court for violatin'—castor possessing. You know what country judges do to anybody caught at flat-tails. You got to produce, though. You've had experience. Get results or over the line you go. That's our way of enforcin' in this country, making violators serve time."

"A man ain't much choice, looks like," Kane shook his head, "Course, I'd get in deeper; instead of just possessing, I'd be trapping."

"Don't come any Philadelphia lawyer stuff on us," Tuohy warned, sharply, "Think it over. Come morning, you'll say *yes* or *no*."

"All right boys," Kane sighed, "I'll figure on it. Looks awful good over the Divide in the Park."

"Not for you, tain't," Cruzan declared, "We got that all took care of right. Keep your nose out of there, minding your business, keeping this side the signs in Lost Pass. The way we do is patent you here in Cloudy Creek Basin, same as others are licensed around. Don't try any tricks on us, get me? You're out on bail, yer own recognizance, that's all. Come spring, and yo' serve time on our account."

"Get the idea?" Tuohy added, "We let yo' finish the winter on yer own. That's real liberal. By good rights we c'd claim in on that catch, too, but we're good fellers."

"Sure looks like," Kane nodded.

"How'd things look down Cloudy?" Cruzan asked, eagerly, "Reckon theh's many in the dams—houses, through the workings? How many do you reckon you c'n pick up there?"

"You mean muskballs, castors?" Kane asked.

"We mean muleskins," Cruzan declared, "Castors are just sidelines."

IN THE morning, Kane emerged from his boughs, robe and blankets, while false dawn was still flashing. The uniformed men wriggled to keep their eyes on him, but this was early for them. Besides, the cave-cabin was chill and uncomfortable until the fire was flaming again.

Fourteen inches more of snow had fallen; it was still coming. Kane summoned his guests to sourdough buckwheat cakes with bear-venison sage sausage, wild honeycomb, with coffee and condensed cream. They ate slowly, sipped at leisure, and smoked afterwards. They'd have to sit the storm out, anyhow. The two were anxious to learn what the trapper had decided to do.

"I could find plenty of witnesses," Kane said, "Any trapper'd swear those castors are old, dried out all summer. You've no case."

"No case?" Tuohy snarled hotly, "No trapper in this country'd dare testify for *you*. We got 'em sewed up tight. Why, we c'n prove anything we want against anybody—against you."

"That's the point," Kane said, "If I tie in with you, don't make any mistake. What's the split on muleskins, anyhow?"

"We just take them," Cruzan said, "They ain't no split."

"Like Hell," Kane exclaimed, "You can't hold trappers down like that. Don't tell me that. What does the trapper get?"

"Why, we just wondered what you'd say," Tuohy interposed, reluctantly, "Generally, it's a four-way divvy, all evens."

"And you were going to leave me out

for a three way?" Kane jeered, "Or did you two figure you could split mine two ways?"

"You don't think we'd snide anybody do you?" Tuohy demanded, indignantly, and Kane laughed in his face.

"You won't cross me up," the trapper said, "I'm a free trapper, and don't forget I can see you a long way before you can me. Now I figure the Basin'll yield up to two hundred muleskins—that's four grand at twenty per. I work fast, and that'll take a lot of handling."

"You c'n deliver them green," Cruzan said, eagerly, "We hire a good handler to clean an' stretch. Good handling makes 50% better price, if done right."

"That's something like for I hate handling," Kane said.

DURING the blizzard Kane made it plain he had to know just who was and who wasn't reliable, and just how reliable, making it understood he never worked with anybody half way, but only the whole hog. He would leave it to anybody who knew if he wasn't all the way, seeing things clear through, right.

"Did you find all of Vandick's camps?" Tuohy asked.

"How do you reckon I found this one?" the trapper asked, "Those castors sure had me guessing. First I thought I'd ship them, but then I figured if I staid with them I'd get hep with good sidelines."

"Be'n sure bad if you'd shipped them," Cruzan declared, "Them's our'n—private. Inspections would have picked yo' up. Easy to git in, but we got yo' sure corraled—don't try any dirty, cheatin', tricky stuff. If a man figures he c'n wallop for himse'f, he's handled. Musks ain't none of your business. Hang up the musk for us, personal. All yo' sit in on is muleskins."

"Yeah? Where'd I be if somebody came that couldn't be fixed?" Kane asked indignantly, "That's a nice bunch inside—all that risk on me. And show me if you c'n get better prices than I can."

"The kind that can't be fixed ain't around these parts," Tuohy chuckled, "We c'n handle anybody. If a yeller pup sticks his nose in, we take care of him, ourse'ves. Why, when the fur traders investigated, all we done was invite them to kiss the affidavies they collected *good by*. Legislators, governors, officials are all alike to us. A good wildcrafter can fool them all easy, if they ain't had personal experience and can't read signs. They never get back where we op'rate through you boys."

"How 'bout chiefs, superintendents—ain't they liable to roam around promiscuous?" Kane asked.

"We put blinders on 'em, an' trot 'em around," Cruzan laughed, "Take this new Windfalls Park boss, Laramie. He's a comical jigger, an amateur sport, soft nature lover, them things. Nothin' practical. Tuohy an' me took 'im for a walk. We actually showed him things, an' he didn't know he'd seen nothin' a-tall. He swallered it when we called squirrels *marten,* he did, actually. A Clarkes crow made him happy all day. Iggerant, he didn't even notice old trap-set breaks in dams. He was sure enthusiastic about beaver cuttin's where they hadn't been none to work in two-three years. He don't know skinned country when he sees it. If he'd seen anything—well."

"You must have caught 'em up, if they're that scarce," Kane said.

"We take ev'ything, clost," Cruzan explained, "What we tell the boys is that a dollar in the pocket's worth a hundred after we're dead."

"Then, too, your jobs won't last forever," Kane suggested, "Somebody is liable to get onto the racket."

"What? Reckon you don't know who's back of us," Tuohy laughed, "We ain't missin' any bets. Don't worry about that. If a man gets smarty, we got the goods on ev'ybody an' all we got to do is take you, or anybody to court, an' to save you, you couldn't get a man to hang the jury even. That's how tight we sew things up. Even judges can't get by us. We don't care who they are, senators or supervisors, if we can't buy them we can fool them, and

what's a trapper more or less, anyhow?"

"Me, f'rinstance," Kane remarked, softly.

"Oh, well, hell—that wan't personal. You're dif'rent, Kane."

WHEN the visitors took their departure to look the boys over in Windfalls Park, they complained about the hard snow-shoeing and at being obliged to break their own trails through the loose fluff over Lost Pass. Kane not only covered his own line, but visited around among his neighbors. The Windfalls trappers at his suggestion all met together for a party at the Government cabin on Old Man Pond, near the Divide in the Park.

The boys who were handling the Park proposition were in with the rest, seven on that job which even the outside trappers

called "ungodly." Two were fugitives from justice, and five had been caught violating on their own personal hook, and so had to "work it out."

"How'd they frame you, Kane?" Candle asked, "Course, tain't none of our business."

"We're all in the same boat," Kane answered, "You know I came into Vandick's line—I knew him. The North Side cabin had more beaver castors hung up to dry than a Hudson Bay post. Sure was a musky camp. One night I came in, dog-tired in that first lasting snow. I just made it. When I built the fire, there sat two fellows in uniforms. Course, they had me dead to rights on possession—reckon you know what happened. I don't often beg, but I know when I'm framed up, right. I knew then what some of the boys meant, shading off on my coming into Cloudy Basin. The two men claimed to be Chert Tuohy and Sinjer Cruzan, and that they'd rather do business in muleskins than have good fellows fined, so they could get 50-50 on the fines. Talk about Free Trappers!"

"They're crowdin' ev'ybody hard," Dummond said, morosely, "The trouble is, they get the goods on a feller if he's vi'latin'. If he ain't breaking the game laws, they frame him. The first time they got me, it was by sticking a beaver into one of my otter sets. Any way they work it, they make a trapper a slave. An' then comes the break up in the spring, they take all the hides, ev'y one a vi'lation—an' dicker with a crooked buyer. They give back what they call twenty-five percent—but they ain't got more'n fifteen plunks for a muleskin in years, to hear them tell it. I know for a fact the boys working open country've be'n gittin' up to $24.50. Course, all our crooked furs is routed through the legal an' license country they keep open. My gosh—they let ten thousand hides go through that one patch, which ain't big 'nough to have a hundred beaver on it. Crooked buyers pay $1000 each to keep it open, too, they tell me."

"I swore last year I'd never stand for it, but the longer a man stays the more evidence is piled up against him," Cammon said, "Well, course, it's better slave-trappin' six weeks than doin' honor-camp road building days an' chained ankle sleepin' nights, let alone stone cell living the year around."

"Jes' the way I feel about it," Shade echoed. "Course, this is my first year here —I never dreamed it was that bad."

"What's your proposition, Kane?" asked one of the boys.

"A trader I know'll come to Slicker," Kane said, "He'll establish a trading post, with Gunlock, who won't lose anything. He'll take all the open-season furs, probably twenty-five percent above the buyers frame-up. All we do is spread down all the open season furs, and we get straight prices and the two slave drivers can't fix

him in. With him is a perfume field buyer. He dickers with Tuohy and Cruzan —and then the same buyer meets them on the muleskin proposition, but by moonshine, of course. They get paid more—they've been beaten down by the combine buying muleskins, themselves. Now they get a look in. If anybody squeals they don't dare make a stink, on account of the kind of a crooked deal it is. Where we come in is Tuohy and Cruzan got to pay us a real twenty-five percent on our whack—not any snide ten percent like they've been doing. And if you boys all come in, the buyer'll add a five percent bonus to all of us on the winter take, besides on the muleskins, too."

"How'll that work out in dollars?" Cammon asked.

"Instead of fifteen dollars on beaver, you get twenty dollars to thirty dollars—split four ways," Kane answered, "that's crooked money and always hot stuff to handle. But on the legal-season furs, it means fifty percent more than you'd get from the buyers. That's what a trappers' trading post does for you. Some trappers get twice as much for furs by combining that way and all selling to honest auction buying."

"Lordy—but that'd be real money," Shade remarked, "I'd get $1200 instead of the $800 we usually figure."

"And don't forget," Kane said, "All the goods they've got on us is goods on them, too——"

"You're taking chances—one of us might squeal on you," Shade said, sharply in genuine warning.

"I'm willing to take the chance on you boys turning down a half higher rate on your winter catch," Kane answered.

WHEN the boys had had their big feast, their get-together party, they all scattered back to their lines, grimly determined. They passed the word around that any one who blabbed on Kane must die. They followed their trails, picking up fur, skinning and stretching it, and cleaning the hides and pelts already on the boards. The passerby in the open wilderness could have seen no sign of the trappers having been organized by the rascals. In the Windfalls Park, of course, the signs that forbade hunting, trapping, or other destruction of wildlife were just so much bamboozling of the public and neither the chance visitors nor honest higher ups could know what was going on, except by following trails.

Kane visited Candle at his line along the eastern boundary of the great outdoor natural history museum, and the old time outlaw welcomed him. He had done time in Folsam, Sing Sing, and Santa Fé. A little job in southeastern Colorado kept him sequestered now. He had taught Vandick fine points of trapping, and he cottoned, as he said, to Kane.

"Summers I'm kind of a day laborer out around," Candle said, "Winters I putter along my lines. I do purty good. Jes' during springs I'm a slave trapper. Them scoundrels would turn me in for a reward, if they knew of one. I told Tuohy and Cruzan about a beaver-pocket over here on ten miles of meander ponds. The hogs are going to trap there themselves. Of course, I cain't say a word, either. Once in the pen I'd never get out alive—not in fifty years."

"I'd sure like to see that country," Kane said.

"Shade said I'd oughta tell you," Candle said, "I'll take you."

Killer, bandit, fugitive, Candle was questionable. Kane knew that the old-timer was helpless, yet desperate. Kane would never forget the strange subtlety of the man's voice. Such a sound could mean much or nothing except an abiding hope of some kind. Candle knew things about deep mountain wilderness Kane had never dreamed, stratagems, hiding places, trail covering, blind tracking. The wonder was the wilderness blackmailers had not been killed long before—uniforms protected them.

The beaver-pocket was a peculiar formation of folded up and pinched off valleys, access to which was only by a tiny entrance

hidden amid a vast tumult of forest-covered ridges. Even the park line patrols had overlooked the valley.

"I thought one time I'd never mention it," Candle said, quietly, "but when I heard yo'd come I reckoned I would. I told Tuohy an' Cruzan. Now I've told you, too, Burr Kane."

"I won't disappoint you, I hope," Kane assured him.

SPRING came. The midwinter primes had had their day when gloss and shimmer shone in the pelage. Then rubbing, fading, early-shed began. Burr Kane took up his traps after middle January and in early February Cruzan and Tuohy came barging in.

"What the hell've you quit for?" Cruzan demanded, "The breedin' season's the best trappin', usin' scent baits."

"Every litter through Cloudy Basin'll average two more pups if we don't disturb them after the rut begins," Kane replied, "I'm going to make a better catch next year, too."

"Who said you'd be here?" Tuohy sneered, "Maybe we'll license somebody else, if we ain't satisfied."

"If not me, some other good fellow," Kane grinned, imperturbably.

"Course, if yo' make good moonshinin', yo' c'n stay on," Tuohy said.

"Don't worry about that," Kane said, easily, "I began learning fur where you left off. You don't even know how to sell, let alone conservation."

"Maybe you c'n tell us how?" Cruzan said, eagerly, "One of the boys said—no matter which one. You got Eastern connections?"

"What if I have?"

"Well, now listen; we c'n use you right ——" Cruzan said.

KANE followed down the streams of the Cloudy. Years of peace and plenty had given the beaver there normal increase in numbers. He had not exaggerated when he said two hundred could be taken. In fact fur-hogs could have stacked up ten or twelve packs. He made elaborate sets, but under each trap pan he jammed a block to prevent the trigger being released. He broke out dams, fussed with swimways, messed around at houses, but he caught none of the living, protected mammals.

Instead he gathered beaver the others caught, moonshine-hijacking, and distributed these around in his sets so that when the two watchful overseers of the trappers came through, they found him apparently doing big business. The two kept tabs on everybody, besides spot trapping themselves through the hidden valley beaver fur pocket they thought they had taken from Candle. Here and there, Tuohy and Cruzan even lifted beaver and left sign to make believe the victims had pulled themselves loose from the steel jaws. Thus they "Johnny Sneakemed"—stole—five animals their own sets had seized and drowned, each of the skins carefully marked by knotted fur, guardhairs and other identification tricks against the day of reckoning. Kane in pretending to violate amassed the exhibits that might be useful for evidence. His camera showed the scamps setting traps, and then the beaver caught at the scene. He was a queer slave trapper.

Traveling night and day, Kane moonshined, hijacked and double-timed. Thus he made up his own big quota by playing at fur stealing, a game many fold more dangerous than that of the forced slave trappers who raided the Park under the auspices of the rascals to escape the other penalties they had incurred. Kane even took the chance of bringing away Johnny Sneakem pelts from Moneta Shade's district.

The spring-prime beaver lasted late. Kane had accumulated facts and proofs beyond his hopes. His winter catch was at the main cabin at Red Brier Forks hidden out. His last hijacking trip took him over into Steel Cammon's country, and he felt that he had made his getaway when, as he came down off the Divide between Cloudy Creek and Horsethief Basin into his own

territory, he walked around a spur and met Cammon and Moneta Shade. The two appeared in the shadowy wilderness on the icy snow, now thawed down and covered with bark dust and shed needles of evergreen trees.

"Looks like yo' been visiting," Cammon remarked.

"I sure have," Kane replied.

" 'Tain't the firstest time yo' didn't find me home," Cammon said, grimly. "Jedging by the tracks it ain't."

"That's so," Kane admitted without cavil, "I've cleaned up clear from Candle's and the Rickeys, on beyond, into here."

"Just what's the big idee, exactly?" Shade asked.

"I'll show you," Kane drew, from his pocket a home-sewed, buckskin wallet, and showed them the photographs he had taken. Steel Cammon was the more demonstrative, he chuckled, grinned, uttering low whoops. Then the two glanced at each other and turned to Burr Kane.

"These all you got like this?" Cammon asked.

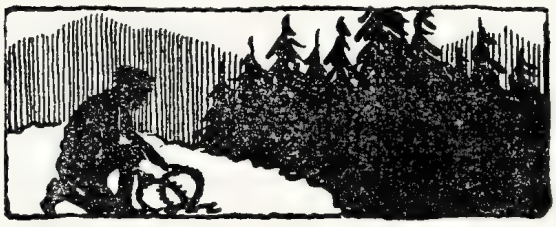
"All—that was my business."

"Where'd yo' git them? I don't know that canyon," Shade said.

"Candle found it, and those two blackmailed him out of it."

"An' yo've got the guts to shove this proposition of your'n through, Kane?" Cammon asked, his voice tense. "You're framing back on them!"

"I've come this far—I've been here ever since last autumn—is that right?" Kane



asked, "I risked coming, and I haven't changed any."

"That's sure so," Cammon said, nodding. "That's all we wanted to be sure about," and Shade added, "Well, good luck and s'long. Count on us if you need our backing."

The two turned back and Kane stood for a few minutes breathing heavily, listening to the crunching of their footsteps on the snow. He hadn't fooled those trappers around him. They had given him a long chain to twist himself up in and then let him go.

KANE cut down to Red Brier Forks where he made up his own private bales of legal furs. The dried castors and beaver pelts, *muleskins* he had cached out, waiting for the grafting deputies' orders.

The warm spring wind had evaporated, melted and carried away the snow. The streams were up. Spring odors were in the air. The trappers' cabins all through the range reeked with the scents of their craft, the sweet beaver musk castors strong in the mountain outlaw dens.

Sinjer Cruzan came up from the wheel-road end.

"We're after the muleskins," he said bruskly, "Didje bring down the dry musk, too?"

"Sure 'nough," Kane assured him, "Can't you smell 'em?"

"Can't smell nothin' else," Cruzan chuckled, "Sure sweet. Some gets sick of it, but I never do. How 'bout that good market for musk?"

"Nothing in it for me, you said," Kane answered.

"We'll split three ways on that, if you can make us a price," Cruzan said, "Tuohy an' I talked it over."

"I can do lots better'n the three-fifty list," Kane said, "Enough more to make you a higher rate, besides my scale. It'll go three grand."

"How 'bout the muleskins, too?"

"The men I know handle everything by airplane," Kane said, "They travel together, a perfumaire and a peltry man, both specialists. They'll be around. I don't sit into the pow-wow, understand. What I don't know about your dickering can't hurt you. I'll introduce you if you want. I stink

enough of the musk without having the hides pinned onto me, too."

"We'll tend to all that, private," Cruzan grinned, "You boys had all the risk of catching. We'll take chances on the bootlegging. What luck'd you have, 'shinin' the muleskins, anyhow?"

"A good fair take," Kane answered, "I got two hundred and three——"

"Why—that's good—an' your first year in this country," Cruzan said, "Some of the boys fell off, considerable. Sure thick in Cloudy Basin."

"I c'n do better when I know the country," Kane said, "Makes quite a wad. Want delivery now?"

"We'll pack 'em down on your burros to the truck," Cruzan said, "Tuohy's with it. We be'n selling to some field buyers, but those fellers thought we had to sell to them. They gouged us down too hard. If yo' got men c'n handle a big proposition, we'll dicker."

"Those others'll have it in for you," Kane said, "I don't want to get mixed up in a fight among you fellows."

"Fight? Say, what we c'd tell if they chirruped, huh!" Cruzan laughed. "Yo' don't need to worry. You're in *right* with us, now."

SOME $16,000 worth of legal season furs were spread in the Slicker Trading Post shed for the buyers to bid on. Sorted out, it looked like a lot of peltry. Prices were down a little, but the catch was up a bit, for the Cloudy Creek Basin had become a fur pocket with no trapping in it for several seasons. The buyers even winked at each other when one of them puttered over a few skunks, bluehide badgers and pale coyotes badly handled by two ranch school boys.

And the cheap little skin-gamesters whispered, taking the assembled trappers off to one side, sniffing at them; "Say, now, you got muleskins, ain't you? Don't tell me *no*. I smell the musk, sure I do."

They even threatened to have them inspected, if they weren't given a look in. One field agent prowled around.

"Where the hell's Cruzan an' Tuohy?" he demanded, but no one knew.

"They must be around," he insisted, "They always are. Listen, I'm from Bergin, see? Get me—*Bergin.*"

The trappers just grinned at him They were standing together, now.

"You tell him to go right straight to hell," Kane jeered, and the field agent backed up, absolutely, utterly dazed. Nobody ever told the big Bergin, or even his man Gursky, to do that—not meaning it.

"Say, mister, who are you?" the agent demanded, asking Kane.

"I'm just the trading post master, that's all—smell?" Kane lifted his fur collar to the man, who sniffed, blinked and led the boss trapper out behind the automobiles.

"Say, now look't," Gursky whispered, anxiously, "Where's the muleskin proposition this year? I make it right wit' you, see—private. Is it them two strangers—did they butt in, heh?"

"Sure they did," Kane whispered, seriously, "They made a straight offer, twenty all through."

"What—twenty? We never paid but fifteen."

"Well, they reached the bounty-uniformers," Kane said.

"That's funny, and maybe them dirty double-crossers think they can get away wit' it," Gursky said, "I better get Bergin to come. C'n you stall things off, like a good feller, till the big boy gets here. He felt something coming in his bones. He's waiting by the phone in Elkid for word from me. He can't afford to lose the muleskin business. It's the rich-cream profits."

"Well, he's needed bad to break up the business," Kane assured him, "The boys got a trading post agreement this year."

"That will ruin our profits, almost," the agent sighed, "And where shall Bergin meet those damned skin-gamers?"

"The Bear-Paw brand outfit. You know it?"

"Sure. Hell, yes—we done moonlight trade there, lots; just wait."

The trappers had combined their whole winter take of furs for the trading post. The fur buyers had to dicker with Kane, who was the post master, and the legal prices were up sixty percent on the combine proposition. The fur buyers looked at each other, finding species and grades of the Windfalls Mountains country all sorted together. Instead of what to the trappers was a $16,000 catch, they had $25,600—which they prorated among themselves, according to the count of the skins.

Then toward night, when the legal-fur catch was sold, Bergin came pounding in in his big twelve-cylinder car, swart, olive faced, shiny skinned and blank eyed, looking for trouble. Would they double-cross him, eh? He jerked his finger at his field buyer, Gursky and they headed over to the Bear Paw with Kane. Bergin started to tell Kane what he thought of the trading post and called him a dirty trouble maker, but Kane slapped his face so hard that the prints of his hand were on the pudgy little man's cheeks.

"Don't talk to me," Kane said, "For two bits I'll kick you all out and let you walk home——"

"But, mister, I don't mean nothing. I just want to do business," Bergin said, "Let's don't get excited. Let's be friends."

"Talk like a friend, then," Kane said.

Real moonshine glowed on the log house, pole fence, creek bottom and sod-dobe shacks at the Bear Paw. A faint yellow glow and wavers of red indicated the sitting room light, and Bergin burst in upon Steel Cammon, his wife, Moneta Shade, Singer, Chert Tuohy and Cruzan. At sight of Bergin the two blackmailing bounty specials gasped. They looked at Kane, whose face wore a serious look of warning. They hadn't expected to have to deal with Bergin and Gursky—only with the independent buyers who had bid the legal catch skins up so high. Nobody could tell which furs came from the park and which from the open country. But any one could tell a crooked beaver.

CAMMON, Shade and Mrs. Cammon listened, leaning back, while Bergin told the double crossers they couldn't back down on him, because he had them dead to rights in their crooked business. And the two men, goaded to desperation pulled their guns. The fur buyer backed up, holding his face, which was already smarting from the slap.

"Don't talk to us," Cruzan said, "We got you a thousand which ways you damned old fur pirate Johnny Sneakem. We'll bury you out in the sand if you open your head."

"Let's be friends," Bergin urged, "I tell you, now we get together right. I meet anybody's price, everybody's price to you. I give you a real price, now. I give you *better* than anybody's. Put up the guns. I made a mistake. Don't you make a worst one. Come, let us do some good business, like we done for ten years—eh, boys?"

Accordingly the three, with Shade and Cammon went out into the patio and over to the tool shed. A two ton truck held the things that Bergin wanted, bales after bales, Hudson Bay standards of eighty pounds each, but they called them muleskins. Bergin's voice purred, squawked, exclaimed, urged, yelped, protested—but, still, it was all right. He knew how the boys were feeling. As it was, he would lose money, but rather than lose their business, he would pay, this time. In the past they had done well by him, and he took big chances—he had heavy expenses meeting the exactions of higher ups and such outrageous transportation charges. But live and let live—that was his proposition. So he paid down the price, by an electric flash light—$25.50 straight through, which was, he would leave it to God and man, ten whole dollars and fifty big cents more than ever he had paid anybody before for, well, muleskins. And no hard feelings, and he had a drink to seal the bargain, right. And so the currency was flitted out around, taken by hands from

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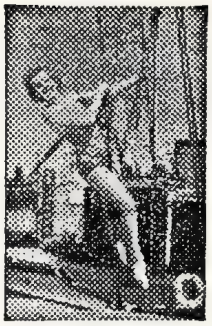

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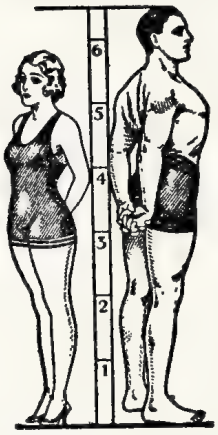

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the shadows and then the shadows slipped away—except Tuohy and Cruzan who stood with the money hugged into their chests and Bergin who rubbed his hands fondly over the bales which were now his, by purchase, legally, with full responsibility and all. "Don't trick me again," Bergin said sharply.

An automobile's headlights suddenly snapped on.

"Hands up, you three," a sharp, hard voice said, "You're under arrest for felony —taking, possessing, trafficking in beaver ——"

TUOHY and Cruzan shrank, their hands dropping to their holster guns, but looked into the double barrels of two shotguns aimed at their breasts. They hesitated, looked to right and left with their lip corners drizzling and then, white and peaked in the light, they raised their hands that flapped like leaves. They felt their guns lifted out by some one who came up behind them. It was Burr Kane.

"Turn and turn about, boys," Kane said, "you wished two grand or so in dried beaver musk onto me—framing me."

"Who are you?" Tuohy gasped, "We're —we're shaping this case up—you see we're —we're putting this case through——"

"No—you took the money and you divided it," Kane said, "I'm the special investigator sent in by the State and Wild Life Investigations, to find out why these magnificent streams protected by law and these parks, supposed to be game and wild life refuges, are being skinned. These are Headquarters men behind the shotguns ——"

"Look who's here," one of the two hold ups chuckled, "Would you believe it—what's your name?"

"Moneta Shade," the man answered, "Superintendent Danton to you, Kane."

"What—Danton?" Kane exclaimed, "You son of a gun—you ordered me onto this assignment—trading me out of the Bad Lands on the Missouri for this job. And you gave me fair warning when I came in——"

"I wondered if you knew what you were up against."

"I knew——"

"Not—not *the* Superintendent Danton," Bergin gasped, "And I be'n trying to reach you—meet you—make it right mit you ever sinct you was loaned by the Government but——"

"Never mind," Danton reassured him. "You'll make it all perfectly all right, now. All you have to do is confess judgment, $1000 fine for each and every beaverskin and throw yourself on the mercy of the court at two years each for each skin—don't forget that the law says the terms must be served in sequence, up to and including the first twenty skins or so."

"I don't forget—I know it already—I'm ruint," Bergin whimpered, "Such a business—and this, in times like these. But —but where's the money I paid to those—those tampt violators——"

"Listen," Kane said, and when they cocked their ears they heard the galloping of horses' hoofs out in the frosty spring night.

"But—but I could testify against them," Bergin said. "Me and these—these two fellers. Those trappers—look what they done——"

"If they testify you'll be convicted for slavery," Kane said. "You know that's the law—when you go in for that kind of stuff. If you want us to, though, we'll——"

"Oh, no—don't." Bergin gasped, "Maybe I got some pull for mitigating circumstances—I'm sick—and old. Vell—I guess I retire from such a business."

"I wouldn't," Kane said, "with the fur laws and conditions right in the Windfalls, we'll take $200,000 worth of fur there instead of $20,000 or so a winter. A crook gets one tenth as much business as he might get in the fur country, if he played the game straight."

"Well, we'll take him to the County Court," Superintendent Danton said, "Come along, boys."

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